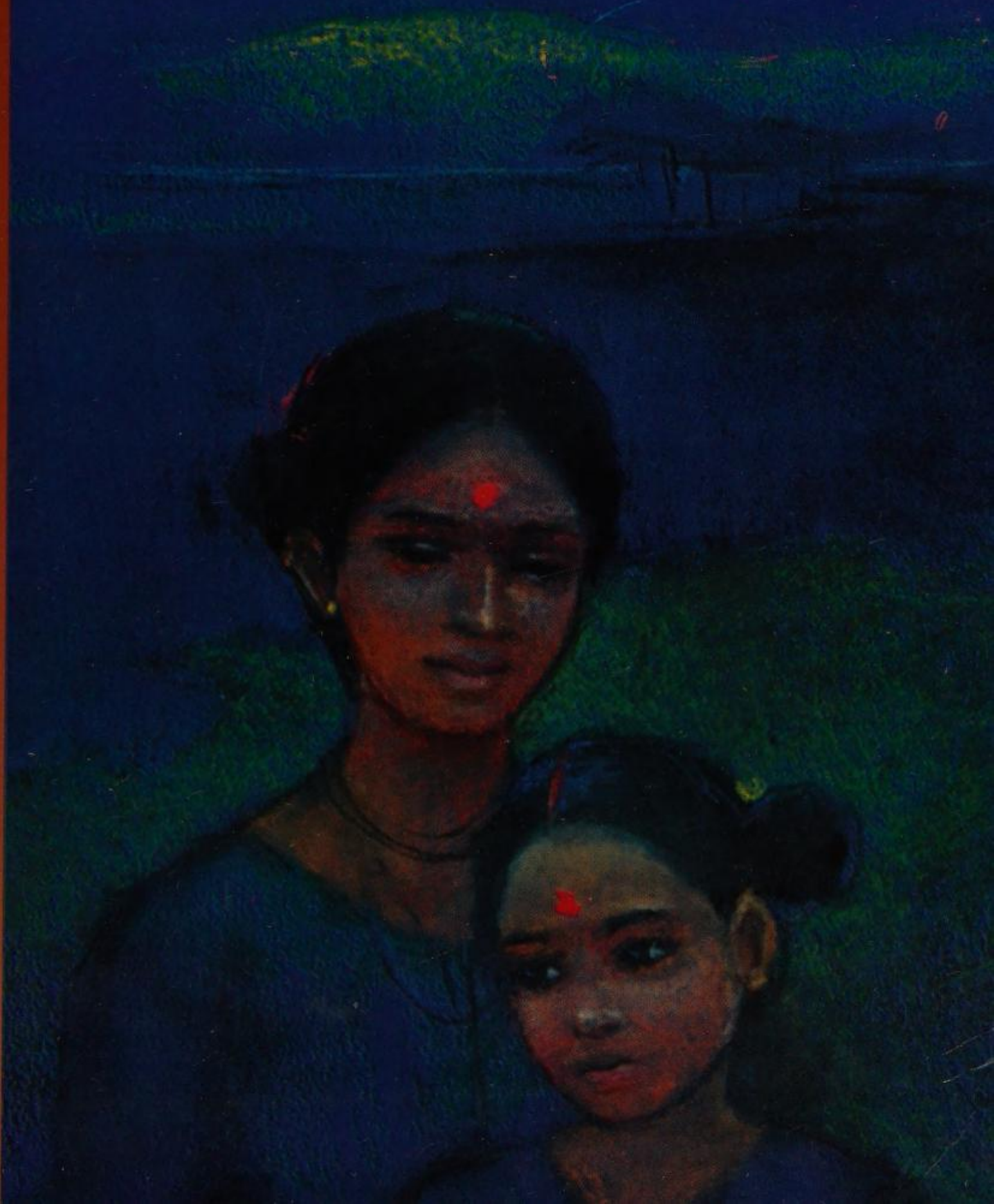
Mahabaleshwar Sail

Kali Ganga

Translated by

Vidya Pai



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Introduction

The Konkani language has had to fight many battles for survival through the ages. Invasions, religious conversion and the inquisition, forced Konkani speaking people to migrate to different parts of the country. The Royal Proclamation of 1684 forbade people in the region to speak or write in the language and this had disastrous repercussions on the growth of the language, its literature and its culture.

There are many references to the creative literature that flourished in the region before the arrival of the Portuguese. The poet saint Namdev who traveled all over the country composing religious verses in various languages also composed some *Gaulan Geet* in Konkani in the 14th century A.D. This is a genre of lyrics that depicts the relationship of love between Lord Krishna and the milkmaids.

Konkani prose treatises like *Ashvamedhu* and *Raghunathvamshachi Katha* written by Krishnadas Shama in the 16th century rank among the pioneering prose works in the Indian languages, says the noted scholar Dr. Jose Pereira.

The first novel published in Konkani was *Kiristanvgho-rabo* by Eduardo Bruno De Souza in 1890. The author paints a picture of social and family life during that period and throws light on some evil social customs prevalent at that time. Vivid portrayals of love and valour tailored to meet the expectations of the semi-literate readership of the time resulted in a vast output of such novels which came to be known as Romances.

Konkani being the State Language of Goa and the

mother tongue of most of its people, it is natural that the output of Konkani literature has been most prolific in Goa. Since there is a large Konkani speaking community in Karnataka significant creative writing in the language also originates in that state. The output from Kerala which was rather sluggish in the recent past has now picked up momentum, and Maharashtra's share of Konkani writing comes largely from those Konkani speakers settled in Mumbai.

Goa, the original home of the Konkani language remained under Portuguese rule for 450 years and freedom of expression was curtailed by strict laws of censorship. This was hardly the atmosphere that could give birth to great literature, yet Shennoi Goembab alias Vaman Raghunath Rao Varde Valavalikar laid the foundations of modern Konkani writing in Mumbai. He tried to standardize the language and provide reference texts for its usage, at the same time he wrote a large number of essays, pen portraits, plays, short stories and novels to enrich the language.

The poet Manjeshwar Govind Pai contributed in great measure to the development of the language, so did other writers like the poet B.B. Borkar, Baya Bhau alias Kashinath Sridhar Naik, Ravindra Kelkar, Dr. Manoharrai Sardessai, Laxmanrao Sardessai and Dr. R.V. Pandit whose works formed the basis for modern Konkani writing.

The European traveler John Laden refers to the creative writing in Konkani being produced in Kerala in the 17th century. Sant Appayya, Raghavdas, Jagavva and Avadi are said to have composed religious poetry at that time, however, none of their work had survived the test of time. While A.D. Ramachandra Sharma composed the first elegy in Konkani, G. Kamalammal acquired renown in the field of Epic poetry. K. Gokuldas Prabhu and Susheela Bhat were reputed short story writers and P.G. Kamath, K. Ananth Bhat, R. Bhaskar and Sharathchandra

Shenoi have made a mark in the field of Konkani poetry. N. Purushottam Mallya, R.K. Rao and N.N. Anandan further strengthened Konkani literature with their translations and thought provoking writings.

K. Gokuldas Prabhu, who received the Sahitya Akademi award in 1994 for his collection of short stories, *Antaraya-mi*, has also written *Prithivai Namah*, the first Konkani novel from Kerala.

There is evidence that Konkani religious poetry was composed in Karnataka by Christians lodged in Tipu Sultan's jails but prose writing got a fillip only after the journal *Konkani Dirve* was launched in 1912.

Joaquim Santano Alvares published his *Aangel* in 1950. It was the first novel in the Mangalore dialect of Konkani. Alvares wrote more than fifty such novels with plots bordering on the fantasy.

Velghadi by the celebrated novelist A.T. Lobo which runs over a thousand pages remains the longest novel written in the Konkani language. Gabriel D' Souza, Dolphy Lobo, Irene Pinto, Mick Max, Lancelot Pinto and Dr. Edward Nazareth are some of the other leading writers from this region.

V.J.P. Saldanha, using the *nom de plume* Khadap, wrote several historical novels like *Mogachi Mahima, Devache Kurpen,* and *Saiba Bhogos*. The social upheavals that took place in Karnataka during the reigns of Haider Ali and Tipu Sultan form the back drop to these works.

The best known Konkani novelist in Karnataka in recent times is Edwin J.F. De Souza who writes under the pen name Vasu Valencia. He has written 27 novels using a variety of techniques. The broad range of his work includes spy thrillers and science fiction. *Mhajya Vodthan-thulo Gulab, Vinhun Kadleli Parja, Khursa Phatlo Ujwad* are three of his celebrated novels. The locale in some of his novels is foreign, hence he is sometimes criticized of being influenced by the work of Western writers, a

case in point being his novel *Jolli Vazram* which is said to have been influenced heavily by Victor Hugo's *Prisoner* of *Zenda*. *Hanv Jiyeta,* which shows the synthesis of objectivism and existentialism has been well appreciated by discerning readers.

Shennoi Goembab's novel *Samsarbutti,* published in Mumbai in 1933 deals with the confessions and discussions that takes place amongst the departed souls on the way to their destined abode after the world has been destroyed by the Great Flood. One is amazed by the author's ability to deal with serious philosophical questions and thought provoking issues in an interesting manner through the conversation of these souls.

Konkani writing began to flourish in Goa only after its Liberation from Portuguese rule in 1961. Poetry and the short story were the first forms to be practiced, but this was soon followed by a crop of novels the most notable being *Eklo Eksuro* by Chandrakant Keni, *Tulsi* by Ravindra Kelekar, *Sood* by Damodar Mauzo, *Moni Vyatha* by Ramesh Veluskar, *Nakhlami* by N. Shivdas, *Pakhlo* by Tukaram Shet and *Bambar* by Pundalik Naik. Since most of these writers were practitioners of short story practitioners, these early attempts are more in the nature of novellas than being full-fledged novels.

Two novels that created a sensation during this period were *Acchev* by Pundalik Naik and *Karmelin* by Damodar Mauzo. Both the novels deal with the deterioration of human values as man struggles to improve his economic situation.

In its early stages, creative literature in Konkani was mostly about the middle and upper middle classes. And when writers looked down from their ivory towers and wrote about laborers, fisherwomen and tenant farmers, it generally lacked authenticity. It was Pundalik Naik who showed readers, for the first time, how different the concerns of the white-collared middle classes were from

the lives that the downtrodden people led.

Pundalik Naik's *Acchev,* faithfully reproduced the landscape of rural Goa, with its fields and orchards, rivers and hillocks, giving the reader a glimpse of the life of lower classes. The elderly villager Abu seems as familiar as the old peepal tree in the village; even the coconut palms in the courtyard, when touched by the keen descriptive eye of the writer seem as familiar as members of any household. Besides, *Acchev,* also documented the changes in the social and cultural life of rural Goa that industrialization brought in.

While the Hindu and Christian communities in Goa have always co-existed harmoniously there is very little intermingling at the individual or social level, rather the two life streams run parallel to each other. Hindu writers have little knowledge of the customs and traditions that make up the life style of their Christian brethren and few Christian writers have made a mark in the field of Konkani creative literature. Hence a picture of the Christian community as it existed in Goa remained unrecorded in Konkani literature for a very long time.

It was Damodar Mauzo's prolific output of short stories in the period between 1965 and 1975 that vividly recreated different aspects of the life style of Goan Christians. *Karmelin,* published in 1971, focused on some of the burning problems faced by the community. It brought to light the plight of native "Ayahs", working in Gulf countries who bring home valuable petrodollars, yet are treated scornfully here. It also presented a broad spectrum of the folk tradition and lifestyle that permeated their lives.

Damodar Mauzo received the Sahitya Akademi award in 1973 for *Karmelin.*

The long years of Portuguese rule has left a deep impact on the people of Goa creating problems, which are specific to the region. Tukaram Shet's novel *Pakhlo* dwells upon the humiliation faced by children born out of

wedlock or as a result of rape when the white skinned soldiers forced their will on the natives.

Chandrakant Keni's novel *Eklo Eksuro* is based in Brazil. A Goan Consul posted at the Indian Embassy in Brazil hears of a Goan, who though innocent, is serving time in a Brazilian jail. The callous attitude of the Brazilian government, the sheer indifference of the Indian Embassy and the cruelty of the man's family are delineated here as perceived by the Consul. Keni has written six novels in Konkani. He was awarded the Sahitya Academi Award for *Vhonkol Pavnni,* a collection of short stories, in 1988.

Viraat, also by Chandrakant Kení, tells the story of a young lawyer who develops relationships with various women. In a bid to flee from them he adopts the saffron robes of an ascetic, but paradoxically, women find him more attractive now, for they feel 'safe' in his presence. The author claims that the novel is based on a true story. He adopts the first person narrative style in all his work. The relationship between men and women and their unfulfilled sexual desires dominate the theme of all his novels yet each work is distinct and readable.

Nakhlami and *Garbhadaan* are two short novels by N. Shivdas who first made his mark as a short story writer. The first tells the story of a thirteen-year-old boy who is seduced by the spirit of a young woman after she commits suicide. Though it deals with superstition and blind faith the novel develops in an interesting fashion.

Garbhadaan, too, has a very uncommon theme. When a landlord mercilessly kills the monkeys that are ravaging his orchards, his wife gets very upset. Even as she is obsessed by her husband's cruelty towards the monkeys she conceives a baby and continues to live under tremendous pressure of guilt throughout her pregnancy. Consequently a freak baby that resembles a monkey is born. Around the same time a young servant woman, with whom the landlord develops an illicit relationship, delivers

a normal and healthy baby. The author signifies that though the latter is an outcome of an illicit relationship this conception proves true and natural.

Hunvar by Datta Sripad Naik deals with the wide-spread destruction that followed the breaching of the Paanshet Dam in Pune. The novel is particularly known for the sensitive portrayal of its characters.

Bhogdand by Hema Naik talks of the problems of women left behind by their husbands, who go abroad in search of employment. *Anjani* by H. Ratnakar Rao tells the story of a woman with strong independent views, but the factual errors in the book and the uninspired prose have done little for its cause.

However, it is *Kali Ganga,* in this decade, by Mahabaleshwar, that has created a stir in the world of Konkani literature. The novel takes the reader on a unique journey along the river. The people, the animals, orchards and fields; the hillocks that roll as far as eye can see; the villages that nestle by the river with their traditional fairs and temple festivals—pictures that are evoked with a rare descriptive clarity.

Suman's mother dies at child birth and the father, who is devastated, blames the infant, Suman for this tragedy. Her sister Manjul takes the place of her mother at a very young age. Manjul gets married, her marriage fails and her husband leaves home. She returns to her parental home to deliver her baby and Suman is forced to take charge of the situation as their father loses his mental balance. Manjul dies leaving three year old Ramesh and the infant Gitu in Suman's care, and soon their father Ganesh commits suicide.

The relationship between Govind and Suman who have been friends since childhood slowly blossoms into love. Govind stands by her side through all her problems and even refuses to be adopted by his maternal uncle because he wants to marry Suman. His elder brothers drag

him away from her and Govind ends his life by jumping into the Kali river mid-stream. Suman has no one else to fall back upon and the novel comes to a close.

Manjul's character is delineated with great care and her story forms an important part of the novel. The tragic tale of the young widow Shobha who kills herself by jumping into a well to escape the evil advances of her father-in-law, tugs at the heart strings. A wealth of minor characters and subplots mesh together in this novel to form a well crafted piece of literature.

The description of nature in all its moods; the reference to superstitions, religious beliefs and folks practices still seen in the region; the characters portrayed with all their virtues and short-comings, and the well paced plot form the four main pillars on which the novel rests.

The author never loses his grip on reality as he recreates the life in this region on the border of Goa and Karnataka. The novel gives valuable insights into the sociological framework of the region through the descriptions of how the village was founded, how religious traditions and folk practices evolved, how people came together to stand united in the face of misfortune.

The author has crafted the whole novel in a refreshingly unconventional manner, yet the title of the book is pregnant with allusions and draws deeply from tradition. On one plane he refers to the Kali river as the 'Ganga' of that region, hence the name 'Kali Ganga'. On the other hand, he puns on the word, 'Kali' which means 'dark'. This river, which is as the Ganga to those who live on its banks, is dark and foreboding and capable of spreading sorrow, he seems to say, adding a whole new facet to story.

The only way to survive in life is to meet all problems and difficulties head on and to try and pick one's way through them, the author says optimistically throughout the novel, yet he takes refuge in convention by making Govind commit suicide at the end. Perhaps we, as readers,

shouldn't worry about whether Govind's suicide is logical or not. Our concern should be in knowing if the author has lost his objectivity, thus prompting Govind to commit suicide, or is it Govind's character as it has developed in this novel that has led the author along this path.

Among Mahabaleshwar Sail's other works include *Polthodchem Tarum* and *Tarangam,* a short story collection which won him the Sahitya Academy award in 1993. The novel *Kaalbhonvro* and the shorter works *Aranyakaand* and *Dishtavo,* (Mahabaleshwar Sail's latest offerings) are sure to garner even more acclaim than *Kali Ganga* did.

DAMODAR MAUZO

Manjul filled a leaf-cup with abole flowers and sat down by the window in the hall to weave them into braid. She was worried about Bayul.....now where had that vagabond gone? She'd been calling out to her all this while as she plucked the flowers but there had been no reply. She looped the banana-stem fibre around her big toe and holding the free ends in her hands deftly wove the flowers into a braid. Suddenly one of the loose ends slipped out of her grasp and the flowers fell to the ground. She picked them up one by one and began the whole process again. Now where had this child wandered off to .... She was fed up of her frivolous ways!

All of a sudden a dried coconut from the palm, outside the window, fell to the ground with a thud. I'll pick it up after I've finished with this, she thought, continuing with her work. In a little while Shevthu ajji, who lived in the next house, appeared, leaning on her stick. Stealthily she moved towards the palm and swooping down on the coconut carried it into her house. Manjul watched this silently, moving away from the window a bit. I'll teach Shevthu ajji a lesson today! All this while she was harassing her daughter-in-law Sumitra kaki for using face powder!

When the braid was ready she hung it on the peg in the kitchen and made her way to Shevthu ajji's house.

"Ajji, can I borrow your sickle?" She asked.

"Why? Where's that big one your father uses to kill tigers?"

"Appa's taken our sickle. To kill tigers, like you said."

Manjul looked around the house and found the sickle as well as the stolen coconut. She picked them up and sitting in the courtyard began removing the outer fibres with few deft strokes.

"Hey you! What are you up to? What are you doing with our coconut?" Shevthu ajji was indignant.

"Your coconut? Where's the dried coconut that fell from our palm? Did some crow carry it away in its beak? Ajji, our coconuts have our names written all over them... look at this thin fibre, these distinctive shapes. People recognise our coconuts and whisk them away even from the heap that is offered to the gods!"

"Too smart! That's what this girl is! Let' see which house she ruins when she gets married...!"

Manjul broke the coconut into two and slicing the fleshy kernel into slivers distributed them amongst the children playing nearby.

"Distributing coconut pieces! What for? To celebrate your engagement?"

"No ajji. Our bull calf has given birth to a cow" Manjul teased the old woman. She placed the remaining half of the coconut before her, "Tell your daughter-in-law to add jaggery and make some sweetmeats out of this" she said.

Manjul returned home to see that Bayul hadn't got back as yet. The rays of the evening sun fell on Kerwadi village in the distance and then on Ghangre rock so that it seemed to loom forward in the mellow light. The Kali river that twisted and turned lazily down the hillock gleamed like a dark bride decked up in ornaments of gold.

All of a sudden Suman rushed into the house with a whole lot of guavas bunched up in her skirt. "What's that you wretched creature!" Manjul exclaimed and saw Pandhari come rushing upto the door.

"Where is she, Manjul, fetch her at once! I won't let her go! That no-good sister of yours has plucked all the tender fruit from my tree, such tender guavas they were, the blossoms hadn't fallen off yet! Yet not one fruit remains! Call her at once or I'll go in and drag her out myself!"

Manjul stood in the doorway blocking his path.

"Pandhari anna, you mustn't go in! I tell you, you mustn't!" "All right. I'll sit right here and wait till she

comes out. I won't rest till I've smacked her good and hard! The wretch!" Pandhari spluttered as he sank down on the stone seat on the porch.

Manjul was beside herself with fright but summoning all her courage she said in a stern tone "Pandhari anna, I won't let you lay a finger on Suman. I tell you that!"

"We'll see, we'll see" Pandhari grumbled settling down firmly on the seat as Manjul stood there blocking the doorway leading into the house. There was not a sound from Suman all this while, who knows what dark corner she had crept into!

Ram dada was passing along that way. "What's the matter, Pandhari?" he called out.

"That little scamp! Ganesh's younger one, she's plucked all the tender guavas from my tree, and this Manjul here won't let me get my hands on her sister!"

"Really wild that Suman is growing to be! A girl! But see how she tears about the village worse than all the boys! She was up on that tamarind tree by the Barmo shrine that day, swinging a stick at the fruit! "

"Oh no Ram dada! She's not that bad! It's just that something seems to have got into her these days...."

"A few tight slaps and everything will be all right!" Pandhari spluttered yet again.

"I'm telling you again Pandhari anna ....I won't let you touch her!"

"You're the one who's spoiling the girl. You stand up for her each time and she gets away with everything! Tomorrow when you get married and go off no one will be able to control that girl!"

"She's not bad, really, very affectionate...."

"Pandhari, don't be too harsh on that child. Poor motherless thing!" Ram dada called out as he moved away.

In a little while Ganesh appeared in the distance trudging along the bund with the plough and other implements thrown across his shoulders. He placed them by the

jackfruit tree that stood by the house and wiped his face on his loin cloth.

Manjul made frantic signs appealing to Pandhari not to say a word but the man was beside himself with rage.

"What's wrong, Pandhari?" Ganesh asked.

"Your younger girl....she's plucked all the tender guavas from my tree....not a single one remains...." he spluttered.

Ganesh wheeled about in silence. He went up to the jackfruit and grabbed the stick, which he used to keep the oxen on track. it was strong and supple and wouldn't snap even if it were lashed against a stubborn bullock's flanks. Pushing Manjul aside he stormed into the house.

"Don't Appa....don't ! Don't beat Bayul!" Manjul sobbed quite beside herself with fear.

Suman had shrunk into a dark corner like a wet chicken fearful for its life. Ganesh dragged her into the hall raining blows on her back and on her legs. The raw guavas clutched in the folds of her dress fell to the ground and rolled away as Manjul threw herself in between and a few blows landed on her too.

"Will you go and rob other people's fruit trees ever again? Will you?" Ganesh demanded, brandishing the stick at Suman. "As it is I'd be happy if you were dead! And now this wretched mischief!"

Pandhari was aghast. What did a few guavas matter he thought shamefacedly wishing that he could run away from the scene. Ganesh tossed the stick aside and shrugged. He picked up the pointed metal portion of the plough.

"Where are you going Appa?" Manjul asked.

"To sharpen this." Ganesh strode away without a backward glance.

Suman was sobbing uncontrollably in Manjul's arms and Manjul herself was almost in tears as Pandhari sidled away.

"Those wretched guavas! What did they matter? How mercilessly he beat that child! How was I to know that

Ganesh would beat her like this! " he muttered full of self reproach.

When Suman stopped sobbing Manjul took her to the bathroom and washed her face. She sat down and began combing the child's hair.

"Bayul, you won't be naughty again, will you?"

"Bai, did you get hurt too?"

"No. Just a bit."

"What's that red mark on your shoulder, then?"

"Your whole body is sore, there are welts all over your back. And you're bothered about my shoulder?"

"Bai, why does Appa always say he would be happy if I were dead?"

"He doesn't mean that. He's just angry."

"Did you see Aai, Bai?"

"Yes."

"And I ?"

"You wouldn't remember. You were only a baby. Only three months old."

"She wore lots of flowers in her hair, didn't she?"

"Yes. She loved flowers. Just like I do. She'd go all the way to the river bank to pluck kandla flowers."

"I don't like flowers."

"Our Bayul is as pretty as a flower herself!"

"Whom did Aai look like? Like you or like me?"

"Like both of us."

"No! I heard Ganga mavshi say 'Manjul looks just like her mother but Bayul is like their father'."

"So what ? Appa is part of our family too. I'm dark, like Aai was. But you're fair. Like Appa."

"Then why does he beat me all the time?"

Manjul drew her close. "No one will beat you ever again. But you must stop being naughty."

Suman began to feel sleepy and lay down on the reed mat in the corner of the hall.

"Don't sleep so soon Bayul or you won't get up to eat. I've made nice curry with brinjal and shell fish"

Manjul said but the child was soon asleep. Manjul sat on the stone seat on the porch waiting for Appa to return.

The sun had just set somewhere beyond the fort and in the twilight it seemed as though liquid kaajal flowed between the Kali river's banks. What had shone like molten silver in the rays of the afternoon sun now appeared like a dark, viscous stream. A boat stood motionless in the distance, its sails tightly furled, its bare mast like a cross on the hillock beyond.

The Kali river, which flows slowly and steadily up to Khargey village takes a different form by the time it reaches Shiddar. It breaks up into two streams forming two small islands in between and as the water gushes forward in a turbulent dance it seems like a dancer shimmering in the sun.

It is only when darkness falls that the streams take on the appearance of serpents, their bodies coiled tightly around the isles. A whole new kingdom springs up around the river, then, and when a raucous birdcall shatters the stillness of the night or when a solitary plume of smoke from some tiny homestead curls up into the sky one feels that one has crossed into some primitive age, somewhere at the beginning of Time.

Manjul sat there staring at the surroundings that were slowly being enveloped in darkness. Her heart was filled with a pensive sadness....memories of her mother swam into her mind. What a thick, big coil her hair made and what a lot of flowers she wore on it! The kumkum on her forehead, as round and as big as a coin, was always smeared with her sweat. Aai seemed to be standing there, right in front of her eyes.

Manjul had been only nine years old at that time but she could remember everything. The peculiar milky smell of Aai's sari seemed to fill her nostrils. Aai's voice seemed to resound in her ears. Manjul's eyes swam in tears as she went in to check on Bayul who was sleeping peacefully,

her breath whistling softly in her little throat.

....Bayul is still so young. Why does Appa want to get me married so soon? Tells everyone, 'look for a nice boy for Manjul.' Bayul can't even draw a small pot of water from the well. As it is, he can't stand the sight of her. She makes things worse with her pranks! I don't want to leave her here and go away but Appa won't listen. Crossed seventeen ....stepped into your eighteenth year, how long can I keep you here, he says. My heart trembles for Bayul.... but who will tell Appa all this? Does he ever listen to anyone?

Appa returned after a long time. Manjul realised with a start that the house and all the surroundings were steeped in darkness and hurried in to light a lamp. Look at me sitting here in the dark like a fool, she thought almost stumbling over the little wooden seat as she searched in vain for a matchbox.

"Why are you sitting in the dark?" Ganesh asked striking a match. "Just like that ....I must he mad....Bayul's asleep, you see...." He washed his hands and feet and sat down in the kitchen smoking a beedi

Vishram, who lived in one of the neighbouring houses came in and squatted before him. Ganesh tossed the pack of tobacco to him and Vishram busied himself rolling a beedi and setting it alight

"Cattle got into the fields yesterday. Through the gap under the mango tree" he said.

"We must be more careful. Not enough for ourselves. Mustn't let the cows eat up that."

"The fields belong to so many people. Who'll guard all of them?"

"One man must be responsible each night."

"You're right. Heard you beat up the little one very badly today?"

Ganesh remained silent.

"Affectionate little thing, she is. And she's just a child. Up to mischief. Don't beat her like that. Poor motherless

children, they look on you as their mother, too." Vishram continued smoking his beedi.

"Bayul, look Appa's here. Get up, now, or he'll get angry." Manjul tried her best to wake the child. "Appa, Bayul isn't getting up" she finally complained.

Ganesh gazed down on the child as she lay asleep. The welts on her legs and on her body showed up vividly in the dim lamp light but there was no sign of pain on her face, as innocent and as peaceful as that of a baby barely three months old. He picked her up in his arms and splashed some water on her face and eyes. Then, setting her down by her plate he said "Eat." Suman ate steadily without even opening her eyes and when she was done she went and lay down again. In a moment she was fast asleep.

"Did Bayul cry a lot? Ganesh asked Manjul, his voice unusually gruff.

"You become wild when you beat her Appa. Don't do that. Ever again." Ganesh remained silent.

It was always like this with Appa, when he was all right everything was fine. But when he lost temper he became totally blind. And God knows what sort of a grudge he had against Bayul! He used to torment Aai like this, too, abuse her for the smallest of things. But when she fell ill and took to her bed he became a different person altogether. He'd take care of all her needs, pull her head on to his lap and feed her like a baby. After she died he roamed about like mad for six months. "My Lakshumi has left me and gone away O God" he wept. He wouldn't even look at Bayul then. Go, throw her into the same grave, he would say.

Manjul was very young then, barely nine years old, but she could remember everything. They needed a piece of sandalwood to put in the pyre but nobody could find one in the house. It was Manjul who finally found a piece and placed it in Keshav bhau's hands. She was crying disconsolately, yet those who came to cremate her mother kept asking her for this and for that. The women from the

neighbouring houses just sat around Aai and spoke in sad tones. Who knows where Bayul was, then.

Manjul was always a very mature child. People said that their mother had left all her maternal instincts behind in Manjul's person .... and Appa loved her dearly, too. A baby boy was born after Manjul but the infant died and then Suman was born and their mother died. Appa changed totally after that, it was as though something inside him dried up and he turned hard and cold. Only Manjul, nine years old at that time turned mature and wise overnight and bustled about in the house like a woman far advanced in years.

When Aai was pregnant the second time Manjul was only six. The women used to say "There's a baby boy in your mother's stomach. Your brother." Aai would push her away if she rested on her belly so Manjul would put her arms around it and lie there thinking of how she'd play with the baby, dance with it and even wash its soiled clothes.

"Aai, when will Babu come?"

"When he's a bit bigger.'

"You'll let me carry him, won't you?'

"Ofcourse. You'll have to play with him, give him bath. You're his big sister, aren't you?"

The infant died before it was born. They took it away even before she knew what had happened. Aai's stomach wasn't big any longer but where was the baby? Aai would sit day after day gazing in the direction in which they'd taken the baby and she'd sit by Aai's side. Sometimes she'd rush to the edge of the courtyard and she'd hear the sound of a pickaxe striking the ground amongst the bushes in the distance. She'd rush back to her mother, terrified, too scared to lay a hand an Aai's stomach too. Aai and Appa moved about in the house in silence for so many days. No one said a word about the infant, she didn't ask any questions either. It was as though the infant, which they had barely glanced at, had cast a dark

forbidding shadow all over the house.

When dinner was over Manjul gathered the vessels and took them to the foot of the palm.

"Appa, come stand in the courtyard while I wash these vessels" she said.

"What are you so scared of? And with so many houses all around!"

"I'm scared of the dark."

"Silly girl! Must tell your husband to build a house for you under the atma tree."

"Why?"

"Because it 's always dark there, even during the day."

"Aai was scared of the dark too. Wasn't she Appa?"

"Yes. Just like you."

"They say that those who are scared of the dark die young."

Don't talk rubbish! That too at this hour!"

The other families in the vaddo hadn't finished dinner yet and the clinking of vessels and the hum of conversation could be heard. The men who were gossiping in Narshinv's courtyard hadn't dispersed yet. In the old days Ganesh would go and sit there too but now he came home in the evening and sat leaning against the wall smoking a beedi.

Manjul freed Suman's arm, which was trapped under her body and drew the coverlet over the child's frame. She lay down beside her sister after untying her long dark hair that lay like a soft silken mass over dark hair that lay like a soft silken mass over her body. She turned to one side as though unable to bear the weight of her breasts, and throwing one arm across Bayul she fell asleep.

The sound of footsteps and the tapping of a stick was heard after a while .... must be Salu ajji, Manjul thought drowsily ..Salu ajji made it a point to visit every house in the vaddo twice a day to check on everyone's welfare. She'd pause in the courtyard at times, on other days she'd come into the hall. At other times she'd come and squat by the fire in the kitchen.

Ganesh was lying on his mattress in the hall when Salu ajji shuffled in.

"The ghosts in the grave yard aren't awake yet, and you've finished dinner! And in your bed too! Asleep, Ganesh?"

"No, Just tired Salu ajji. Had a long day ploughing the field,"

The old woman sat down with her back braced against the wall. "No one dies till Death comes to take him. And you can't get to sleep till Sleep comes. You're looking like a plucked chicken these days, Ganesh."

"My fate. What else"

"What fate are you moaning about! Widowed at twelve? If I'd sat there moaning about my fate then I wouldn't be here looking after everyone in this vaddo! Two wonderful children you have... now give me a beedi."

Ganesh passed her the pack of tobacco and she rolled a slim beedi with a strip of plantain leaf.

"Thought I saw you on the Mhasti hillock today?"

"**Yes.** I was gathering roots, bark and twigs ... My whole life has been spent doing this...ever since my uncle taught me the art of making medicines. There were so many children in our house, Ganesh, why did my uncle choose me for this, then?"

"You're a clever one, Salu ajji! Maybe he couldn't find any other child as clever as you!"

"One thing is certain Ganesh, ever since I started making these medicines I even forgot that I was a widow."

"But let me tell you Salu ajji, when you die we 'll have to throw your bundle of medicines into the Kali River. No one will be able to recognize a single root or piece of bark so no one will be able to use it."

"You're right Ganesh. I want to teach someone all this but who'll take so much trouble? Come with me to the forest, I'll teach you to recognize roots and leaves I say, but no one comes. Today you pay fat sums to these doctors and they give you pills. And here I've been giving medicines

free for so many years, but no one cares!"

"True... You're right!"

"If your younger one was a bit bigger I'd sling my medicine bundle around her neck, clever little thing she is! Where do these stars that fill up the night sky go during the day? I asked her once. Do you know what she said? A flood of daylight comes and drown them! Are the children asleep?"

"They must be. I'm worried about them, Salu ajji."

"Don't worry Ganesh. Trust in god! He lays a bed for the infant in the mother's womb even before the baby is conceived and fills the mother's breasts with milk before the child is born. He'll take care of them, don't worry."

Salu ajji suddenly began to cough without a pause and her bony sides moved down as her breath whistled noisily in her throat.

Once tall and long of limb Salu ajji seemed to have shrunk over the years. If her frame was tightly rolled up she would be no bigger than an unhusked coconut, Ganesh thought, so old and shriveled had she become. The wispy white hair on her scalp looked as though it would be blown away by the slightest breeze.

But what a clever woman she was! In Aashad and in Sraavan when Vishnu read the *Harivijay* and the *Pandavpratap* aloud she'd sit by his side and explain the passages in simple words so that everyone would feel like listening to her again and again. She was always in the forefront at a wedding or a funeral and when she helped draw up the list of items that would be needed at a wedding you could be sure that not a single coconut would fall short.

When her brother Yaso died, his son was only ten or twelve years old. It was Salu ajji who took on the responsibility of tending his fields that stretched over eight khanis. Every morning she'd take the plough and the other implements and go to the fields. She'd plough one furrow herself and then help the young boy guide the oxen down

the rest of the land. They say she is the first woman in this village to ever set hands on a plough.

When her cough subsided and she could catch her breath again Salu ajji said "Fighting has broken out on the borders, China has attacked our Bharat, they say, Sripad Shet of Hulgey had come yesterday. He said the news came on the radio. But this wretched village! Not a single radio in any house!"

No one from this vaddo is at the front this time, isn't that so?"

"I keep asking everyone that, but no one knows. Maheshwar and Balu are in Kashmir, I know that. Manohar is in Assam it seems. But Sadanand hasn't written for more than a month, his poor mother keeps crying all the time."

Naturally, He's an only son, isn't he?"

"Didn't listen to anything she said. Went and joined the army. Poor Aprupe is shriveled up with worry since he left, poor thing!"

Ganesh and Salu ajji set about counting the youngsters from the vaddo who were in the army. Nine of them, they counted on their fingers. Nine youths from a total of eighteen houses.

"Like oxen! The men in this vaddo. Don't read! Just run away and join the army. That too, the infantry! Thick headed louts! And here we sit and worry!"

"Same thing during the war with Germany, Salu ajji, half the men from this vaddo were at the front. Whenever the postman came this side people would wail in fright. When Maheshwar's father was declared missing three telegrams came one after the other and what a commotion there was!"

"And still the son goes and does the same!" Salu ajji turned to face the temple of the Devi, Mother, come to our aid! Let each of these youths come back safely and I'll bring each man and his wife to your temple to offer prayers! Only you can protect them from fire

and water in those far off lands!"

"Careful! Don't hit your head against the beam" Ganesh called out as the old woman picked up her stick and prepared to leave.

"Can't stand straight. How can I bump my head then? I'm weighed down to the ground, these days."

"Want a light?"

"What for? Lived here all my life..."

"It's not that ...You might stamp on that One, the One who remains under foot..."

"I'm not afraid of that one any longer, if it wanted to hurt me it could have done so long ago. Once, when I was digging up roots a big One danced over my hands. More than a foot long it was, yellow as a turmeric pod with a dark stain as big as my palm! And let me tell you one thing Ganesh, it has never taken a single life in this neighborhood. It is because, our Mulpurush, the ancestor who set up this settlement still watches over us. He roams all over the village leaning on his stick guarding us from harm...I tell you, I've heard him myself!"

Lord Mallikarjun of Ganvdongre was the deity worshipped by all the families in this vaddo so there was no doubt that the ancestor who set up this settlement had originally hailed from Goa. The villagers of Shiddar, who were the original residents of this area thus referred to this settlement of outsiders as the vaddo of the jevankaars and whenever someone in the village celebrated a festival or performed the rituals carried out after a death in the family they always invited people from this vaddo to partake of the ritual meal.

There is an interesting story that has passed down from generation to generation about how and why that long forgotten ancestor left his home in Goa and came to settle down in this distant place.

They say that there were two little hamlets nestling in the valley between two hillocks and the people of these two hamlets were always at each other's throats

quarreling about the land on which the cattle grazed, or the hill slopes on which they grew their crops of vegetable and of grain.

One night the people of one village untied the hundred odd cows that stood in the cattlesheds of the other village and herding them down a steep slope forced them to jump off a cliff. Many of the cows died a gory death, others wallowed in pain with broken limbs or ran off into the jungle where they were eaten by tigers.

The next night the people of the second village laid siege to the first. They beat the villagers soundly and cutting off the head of the village headman they propped it up on their empty cattleshed before setting the whole structure alight. They then picked up their belongings and fled, each man in a different direction, fired by the need to build a new life.

The ancestor who built up this settlement first came down from Goa to Halgey village but those villagers did not let him stay there even for a night. He then travelled to Hulgey but those villagers didn't let him set foot within their borders so he crossed the river to Khargey village hoping settle there. In those days a stranger who wanted to enter a village had to get permission from the village headman and this was not easily forthcoming so when the villagers advanced towards him armed with sticks and clubs he decided to seek refuge elsewhere.

Overcome with despair he sat by the temple at Shiddar with his wife and children by his side. The Narshinv temple at Shiddar was being rebuilt in those days and everyone was preoccupied with the task of hoisting the massive wooden beam weighing twelve maunds up on top of the main pillar. They struggled in vain for five days and flicker of hope was kindled in the Mulpurush's breast. Tall and robust of build he was like a figure moulded out of beaten iron with the strength of an elephant.

"All of you gather at that end and put your shoulders to the beam. I alone shall hold this end up" he declared.

As the group of men raised one end of the beam he nimbly hoisted the other up on his shoulder and rested it on the pillar as the whole village gaped in astonishment.

"Who may you be? And where are you from?" The temple administrator came up to him..

"I've left my home and everything else and come to this region you call Shinveshwar. Give me shelter in your village sir, I have nowhere else to go."

The temple administrator took him before the village elders and said loudly so that everyone could hear.

"There... See that kadam tree and that sanvri over there...? All the land between those two trees is your's. Go drive a stake into the ground and build a home. Live there in peace. There is a lot of fallow land down there by the river, tend it so that you may eat. The land is hard and the work is tough but it gives a good yield. Sometimes the river overflows its banks destroying everything..but when you get a good crop in one year there is enough to last for at least three..."

The Mulpurush picked up his belongings and walked towards the kadam tree.

"And look here..you were the first one to raise the beam on the temple roof so when the Narshinv temple festival is celebrated one of the seven coconuts broken before the sacred kalash will be in your honor. You will occupy a position of honour in this village. Who is your family deity?"

"Lord Mallikarjun of Ganvdongre."

'"Then you are not of our stock, you are our honored guest! The villagers can invite you to partake of festive meals as a jevankaar whenever they celebrate rituals."

The Mulpurush and his family looked around the site near the kadam tree. Broken remnants of a tulsi pedestal and a stained oil lamp lay among the ruins of a house

thickly overgrown with bushes. A wayfarer stopped to talk to them.

"Nothing good comes out of this cursed site. Any house built here does not last more than four rainy seasons and those who live here cannot enjoy the pleasures of sons and family. A pregnant woman who died was buried at this spot even while the child in her womb was still alive, they say. Her spirit haunts this place and lets nothing flourish here."

The Mulpurush was thrown into great consternation at these words. Now where would he go with his family all over again? At least they had got the blessings of the village elders here. Finally he decided that they would stay here come what may, so he picked up his axe and drove a stake into the ground and they set up a new home.

Today a total of eighteen branches of the Mulpurush's family are living at this site. Thirty homesteads, happy and content. Mango and coconut trees grow thickly all over the vaddo and there are four wells at the four corners each as big as a lake. Rows of fields stretch out on all four sides and beyond them is the Kali river with its islands.

In the north the fields stretch right up to the hillock and the road that winds its way to Karwar city seems like a little foot track from this distance. This is the only vaddo of Shiddar village that is located in the middle of the fields, all the other clusters of houses nestle at the foot of the hills. The huge green hillocks cast their shadows all over this village and it seems as though these houses are nestling in the very lap of nature, so cool and pretty and healthy is the atmosphere in this place.

It is only when the rain falls continuously for days on end and the water in the Kali river begins to rise that the people in this lower vaddo begin to tremble with fear. They live in constant apprehension that the water will overflow the banks and come up to the edge of their courtyards, that it will begin to enter their homes. Only then do they gather their bundles and leave their homes for this is what

happened in the year of the Great flood when the whole vaddo remained under water for almost thirteen days.

Ganesh got up at daybreak and shook Manjul awake. "Must plough the patch by the old mango tree. Send Bayul with tea and bhakri. Don't be late. Then I'll go up the hill to gather branches for the fence."

Manjul got up as soon as he was gone and smoothed her hair into a bun. She fastened the two top buttons of her blouse noting that the cloth was worn out and new blouses would have to be stitched soon for her, and a frock for Bayul. She had soaked a measure of parboiled rice and half a measure of raw rice the night before so she soon sat down at the grinding stone to make the batter for the bhakri.

"Bai are you going to make polis today?" Bayul asked eagerly as soon as she was awake.

"No. Bhakris."

"I don't want any."

"You want polis every day! You need udad dal for that, and oil to roast them."

"No school today, Bai."

"Why?"

"Today's the Bhandi Jatra at the temple at Majale."

"So? The festival is at Majale. Why is your school at Shiddar closed then?"

"Our master is from Majale. Everyone says it's a very big festival. People even come from Goa for it."

"I went once. With Appa. His cousin Sadu mama lives there. They have two huge chariots. Hundreds of people grab those long ropes and drag them forward screaming 'come bhandi..come..!What fun! So many abole garlands on the top of the chariots...looks like they'll touch the sky! And what a noise! The chariots jerk up and down...and the crowds rush along!"

"Appa doesn't take me to any jatra."

"He doesn't go anywhere these days. Not even to the festival in our own temple. But he used to when Aai was

alive. To the temple festivals. To see plays."

"But why?"

"Who knows? Do you know, Bayul, Appa even used to act in those plays. I can still remember ...one time he had put on such a long beard... I was sitting right in the front with Aai. How she laughed that day!"

Suman merely grunted and went back to her bed.

"Hey! Don't go back to sleep! Go get the milk from Bhiku Anna's place...I have to make tea."

Suman picked up the vessels and set off. Dawn had broken but the atmosphere was still quite cool. A light breeze ruffled the palm fronds scattering the dewdrops that had gathered on them and Suman shivered, crossing her arms across her chest.

A huge cauldron bubbled on the hearth in Khusali's courtyard where he was boiling vast quantities of paddy. The paddy that had been boiled the previous day was spread out to dry on the smooth dung smeared floor. Suman paused for a moment to soak in the warmth. She could hear the roar of the water boiling in the cauldron and the hissing and spitting sounds as it gushed out into the flames. Khushali kept a watchful eye on the paddy pushing the logs deeper into the fire from time to time.

"How many cauldrons are done, Khushali?" Hari, wrapped in a blanket, edged closer to the warmth.

"This is the eighth. The last."

"Only eight?"

"Bad harvest. Last year I got eleven. Still it was tough stretching things out till the next harvest. God knows what will happen this year. Will have to go to Nilu to get rice at inflated rates in the last month."

"Ha Nilu! Comes to the harvesting platform and takes away one and a half measures of paddy for every measure he lends! And then says we've given him bad quality grain! Our own blood, but see what crooked business tricks he tries!"

"You 're lucky Hari. Fifteen years in the army and now you can live on the pension."

"Arrey, I was eighteen when I joined the army and what a hard life it has been! Here you people took over the Brahmin landlord's fields and have been enjoying them ever since! Now all of you are big farmers! My brother didn't even divide my father's property equally, said, I looked after it all this time so take what you get. What could I say. My big brother after all. And all you people can see is the pension!"

"Say what you like Hari, this process of farming is full of risk. Our ancestors were right when they said trade is the best occupation. Next is service. Farming comes last."

Khushali pulled the flaming logs out of the hearth and called out to his wife to bring the ladle and baskets to strain the paddy, His eyes fell on Suman all of a sudden. "Now when did this Mungalalu get here?" he said.

Suman turned away shyly and ran off to get the milk. When she was very little someone had given her a moong laddu and she had danced all over the vaddo with the sweetmeat in her hand chanting 'mungalalu..mungalalu' and everyone still teased her about this.

When Suman got back home with the milk Manjul had made the tea. "What took you so long..did you have to milk the buffalo yourself?" She demanded angrily, "But Bhiku anna just finished with the milking..." Suman protested.

"All right.. all right. Wash your face and drink your tea." Manjul poured Appa's tea into a copper urn and placed it by the hearth

Then setting the tea and bhakri before her she said "Suman, eat quickly. Then take Appa's tea and bhakri to the field. I'm going to the well to fetch water."

Manjul picked up the pot and the rope and set off. When Suman finished eating she saw Govind, Manu, Chandrakant and the other boys passing by the house..

"Where are you going Govind?" she demanded.

"To Bhanvri lake. To pluck water lilies."
"Is the water deep?"
"No. Just up to your waist."
"Can I come, too?"
"Come."
Suman didn't waste any more time. She left the door ajar and sped off after the other children.

When Manjul got back from the well Suman was nowhere to be seen. "Suman..O Suman..." she called out but there was no response. Mad Gangu was taking his herd of cattle out to graze and the air resounded with his curses for a while. When he had passed by Manjul called out again.

Sumatra mavshi who lived in the house in the middle came to her door. "Must have gone with the other children to pluck water lilies at Bhanvri lake. I saw her talking to them" she said.

"Just let her get back. I'll give her a good whipping myself" Manjul muttered angrily as she wrapped the bhakris in a piece of cloth and picked up the vessel of tea for her father who was waiting in the field.

"Suman woke up late. She's eating now. Thought I'd bring this myself" she said when he asked her why Bayul hadn't come.

There was no sign of the girl when Manjul got back home and her irritation knew no bounds. She picked up a slim cane and propped it up in a corner, I'll teach her a lesson myself, she thought, as she began to weave grass ropes for binding the mudos.

The sunlight glittered on the river and on the hillock on the other side so that the two villages Halgey and Hulgey that were nestled on its slopes seemed within arm's reach. The red tiled roof of the newly built school at Hulgey could be seen even from this distance and the creaking sound of the contraption as someone watered the low lying fields by the river carried to her ears.

Manjul was angry with her sister but she was worried

too. This wretched girl...gone there to play with all those boys! The villagers scoop out clay from the lake bed to make Ganapati idols every year...if the children step into one of those hollows they'll never be seen again...

Gokul kaki who lived in the next house was smearing her dung. She did that every summer...first beating the ground smooth and applying a layer of dung and mud, and when this was dry she'd cover the whole with a coat of glossy black dung. Then Khushali anna would fix a canopy of palm fronds just outside their door and the whole house would seem cool and inviting. All the court-yards in the vaddo were smeared with dung in summer but there was something special about Gokul kaki's yard with its glossy tulsi pedestal... It looked so pretty you wanted to dance all over it!

Gokul kaki cupped the last bit of dung in her palm and threw it into the dung pit.

"Kaki, ask the dancers to dance in your courtyard this year when the procession moves through the village at Shigmo. They'll dance even better when they see such a pretty courtyard!" Manjul called out.

"I would. I'd even give them rice and coconuts...but you know they can only dance in the Mulpurush's court-yard, before the main tulsi plant..."

"But your yard is so pretty, someone should dance here!"

"You talk of my yard? See how neatly your father cuts the ridges and furrows that border his fields."

That was true. Appa had a very fine, artistic hand and even the haystacks he built were always neat and strong. But something was wrong with him these days, his hands seemed to tire easily. The mudos he had woven recently seemed shapeless and ready to burst on one side, how round and firm like a ball they used to be in the old days!

Suman nervously stepped into the courtyard after a very long time. She was sopping wet and bunches of lilies

were draped across her shoulders while the skirt of her dress was full of lily pods. Her fair small face seemed like a flower in the midst of all those liliés and Manjul, despite her irritation, could only stare at her. The child came forward and held out a plump lily pod "Bai, eat" she said.

The sheer innocence radiating from the girl's face made Manjul speechless. She gathered the flowers draped across her shoulders and sniffed deeply of them. When I was as big as you are now Bayul, I was already playing mother to you! But you're still so full of mischief...when will you give up these wayward ways? In a moment she was transported back in time and Suman became a three month old baby before her eyes while Manjul herself, all of nine years old, bustled about like a mother to her...

Manjul was sitting by the hearth in the kitchen tending the pot of gruel. The bubbling liquid kept gushing out of the pot dousing the flames again and again. Suman, who was then only five months old, was crying without pause. Manjul hurried through her work eager to pick up the baby..the stream of hot gruel burned her hand...Out in the hall Ganesh was raging at the baby"Damned creature... Bawling all the time! Ate up its mother within a month... who does it want to eat now? If only it would die..!"

Manjul ladled some rice water into a plate and fed the child. She then began to slice the drumsticks. Ganesh meanwhile sat in the kitchen grating the coconut. The sound of the grater reminded Manjul of her mother...

Aai would sit in the kitchen grating coconut... she always used a lot of it in her curries and Appa was always yelling at her because the coconuts he had plucked got over so soon...but she couldn't cook in any other way. Sometimes Manjul's mama would come for a visit and he would bring strings of fresh fish..."That tasty humman that you cook ...that's what brought me here..." he'd say, and then there was no holding Aai back!

Aai would grate the coconut and I'd scoop up the shavings and run away into the yard..."Naughty girl!" Aai would scold...but I didn't mind. No one says that to me anymore.

"Manjul, child, you must be a mother to Bayul from now on. You must cook for your father..." they say now.

Ganesh tossed the drumsticks together with the coconut, onion and chilies into the pot and sat there by the hearth.

"Finished cooking Manjul?" Gokul mavshi called out from the back of the house peeping in through the kitchen window. "Oh, it's you Ganesh, But you had gone off early this morning, I thought..."

"Yes. Got back just now. Tired of digging up all that mud."

Gokul mavshi moved off muttering to herself "Poor man. All that work in the fields and now this cooking too! But how much can a ten year old child be expected to do!"

Manjul watched Gokul mavshi hurrying away. Short and squat she was, but when it came to work she was like a tiger, not bothered about rest. When she went to the fields to sow or to reap she always moved far ahead of the other women and when she went to the jungle to gather firewood she always came back with such a massive bundle that even the men would stare, amazed.

Manjul put Suman to sleep and picked up the baby's soiled clothes.

"Appa, Bhiku anna was asking about the money for Bayul's milk. Said he needed it to buy fodder for the buffaloes" she said fearfully.

"Tell him I'll give his money. Won't eat it up! And there's no need to bring milk from tomorrow. Feed her rice gruel. If she lives, she lives."

"No Appa .... she'll be hungry without milk..."

"Feed her gruel I said!"

When Manjul got back from the well with the washed

clothes Leela tai was rocking Bayul in her arms trying to quieten the wailing child.

"Now where did you go off leaving the poor thing all alone? See how she cries! Must be hungry" She scolded.

"But Appa was here ..where has he gone now.." Manjul muttered to herself as she mashed up some grains of rice from the gruel to feed the child.

"What's wrong with you? How will she digest this stuff?' Leela tai was aghast

"Nothing will happen...here..... give her to me.." Manjul took the infant and spooned a few grains into her mouth but the child immediately spat it out again.

"That's enough now, Bayul, if you don't eat rice you'll get only water from tomorrow. Appa has said 'no more milk'."

She went into the kitchen and poured all the milk in the vessel into a dish. She fed the baby and with its stomach full it laughed and whooped and gurgled with joy as Manjul rocked it on her legs pretending she was a boat or maybe an aeroplane.

After a while Bayul began to nod sleepily and Manjul began to worry all over again— what will happen tomorrow, she thought, Appa has said there will be no more milk!

Bhiku anna was passing by their house. Maybe he'll ask for the money again, Manjul thought standing quietly by the door to the hall but he came straight into the courtyard and called out to her again and again.

"Yes, Bhiku anna", she came out fearfully.

"Big Mother Hen you're getting to be!" he exclaimed. "Who do you think will feed Bayul her milk?"

"I've told Appa about your money."

"I know. Met him just now. He's mad, that fellow! Says he doesn't want any more milk! Started cursing me, too ! Let him say what he wants, you go and fetch the milk every day. He can pay me when he wants. The poor child has lost its mother and doesn't get her milk. Now, if I stop

giving her milk too....! They say that one who donates money helps a man in trouble but one who donates milk saves a life!"

Manjul's eyes swam with tears and she tried desperately to swallow the lump in her throat.

"Run along now. There's a vessel full of milk in the house. Ask your mavshi to give it to you" he said.

Appa got back late that evening and without bothering to wash his hands and feet lay down in the kitchen with the blanket pulled over his head. Bayul was asleep so Manjul placed the oil lamp close by his side and sat there nodding drowsily. She was too scared to wake him because he flew into a rage very quickly these days. She sat there lost in dreams of the past ....

Aai and she are sitting in a boat, they are going to mama's house. Her frock smells new, Aai's sari is edged with gold and she has lots of flowers in her hair....Aai is plucking the ripe mangos that hang from the boughs of the sakarambo tree. She takes a small bite from one and then gives me the whole fruit ....I press my ear to Aai stomach. "Aai....baby inside...." I say.... !

Suddenly Manjul lost her balance and her head knocked against the wall. Appa stuck his head out of the blanket and saw that she was half-asleep. "Bai, get up. Let's eat." He served the food and they sat down to eat in silence. Aai's shadow seemed to hover in their midst and if either of them said a word about her they would be sure to burst into tears. This kept happening for a month or so after she died. If they heard a light footstep or a soft voice their eyes would swim with tears. Appa, in fact, was so shattered that Manjul often thought he was weeping with the blanket pulled up over his head.

"Bai, did you give Bayul her milk?" Appa asked when they had eaten.

"Yes Appa. Bhiku anna said to take the milk."

"Yes. Fetch the milk. I'll pay."

Yashwant and Abole came in and sat down silently in front of Ganesh. The whole village treated this couple with the greatest indulgence for they were always doing everything together. They'd go to the fields or to the jungle side by side. When the man ploughed his field she would sit on the embankment and keep him company. When she hoed the field he would always be there by her side. People teased them and said they were as inseparable as a pair of mynahs. However, it was the picture of them huddled under a single umbrella while the rain lashed the field from all sides that Ganesh always saw when he thought of this couple.

Yashwant picked up the axe that lay in a corner.

"The handle is broken. Aren't you going to replace it?" he asked.

"Must go to the jungle and fetch a piece of wood soon" Ganesh agreed. Now what has these two come here for?

"A home without a woman is like a pipal tree without a platform around it. And you have two daughters. So much will happen to them as they grow up. Girls need a mother's guidance all the time", Abole said in a very solemn tone.

"One has to suffer whatever is written in one's fate."

"You'll suffer now.... But what will happen when you are old and crippled? We all need someone we can call our own."

"What can be done about that now?"

"Why? You can get married again. You're not that old!"

A heavy load seemed to settle on Ganesh's head, what he had always been afraid of had finally been said.

"You're crazy Abole! Get away from here, both of you!"

"When a lamp goes we set it alight again, don't we? You're going to fix a new handle to that broken axe, aren't you? Men get married three and four times when their first wives are still alive. And you, do you plan to stay like this

for the rest of you life? At least think of those two innocent children of your's!"

Ganesh remained slouched with his head in his hands.

"My uncle has a daughter....dark, but strong and healthy. Uncle is confined to bed ever since he fell off a coconut palm."

"So you want to dump this cousin of your's on my daughter's heads as their step mother?"

"Mogre's a good girl, Ganesh bab. And I'm right here, too. If she behaves badly with the girls I'll grab her by her hair and knock sense into her head!"

No one knew what was happening to Bayul these days, she kept crying all the time. She couldn't digest anything and kept vomiting whatever little she was fed. Her stomach would often swell up too, and she had lost a lot of weight. The rosy colour of her skin had changed into a sallow milky pallor, only her eyes gleamed dully in her shrunken face. Sometimes she'd look at Manjul and try to smile but the effort would make the veins stand out sharply and it seemed that she was in pain. When she cried Manjul would do everything possible to make her stop, finally she would begin to cry too.

Appa would go and fetch Salu ajji again and again. The old woman would try fomentations and poultices, make a paste of roots and herbs. She wouldn't give up; what a person with fever needs is a dose of rice gruel, what an ailing infant yearns for is the warmth of its mother's body, she always said.

When Bayul began to wail Appa often sat mutely in the hall, cold and heartless though it seemed. But Manjul couldn't control herself, rushing in and out of the house, calling out to various mavshis and kakis and they never failed to rush to her aid. This is the fate of a motherless child....it will have to grow up facing one crisis after another, they always said. Finally someone suggested that

Bayul be taken to Karwar where a doctor could see what was wrong.

"Appa, let's take Bayul to Karwar by motor launch. Let's take her to the doctor tomorrow" Manjul urged but Ganesh merely grunted in assent.

Bayul cried without pause all that day. Each man sat in his house listening to those wails that filtered steadily through the palm fronds and mango leaves and settled over the vaddo. Sometimes an exceptionally loud shriek hurled itself against their ears making them flinch. Must tell Ganesh to cross the river and take her to some doctor on the other side. Don't wait for something terrible to happen you wretch, if something happens to the child her mother's spirit will never forgive you!

Sumitra kaki came to the door all of a sudden. "The child wants to suckle at its mother's breast. Keshav's daughter Sulochana has come to her parent's home.... take the child there ...." She said.

Manjul stared at Sumitra kaki with great faith and awe. Tall and fair of skin, Sumitra stood quite apart from all the other woman in the vaddo. She did all the work in the house but her clothes were always neat and clean. People said that she was a clerk's daughter, the youngest among five girls. Her father was involved in some financial scandal and lost his job and that is how this tall, good-looking woman landed up as Narshinv's wife. She always stood apart and took note of everything that was happening. Then, in a soft clear voice she suggested what ought to be done and sure enough, everyone always listened to what she had to say.

Manjul ran to Lila tai's house through the darkness and soon the two girls were crossing the vaddo to Keshav anna's house which stood on the far side. The people in the different houses had just finished dinner and were getting ready for bed. Bayul was whimpering softly and Lila held her hand across the child's mouth to muffle her cries.

Keshav anna's house was dark except for the faint

streaks of light that came through the door. Sulochana's voice could be heard talking softly to her son.

"Sulochana tai....Sulochana tai...." Manjul called out in a torn, cracked voice as Bayul began to whimper yet again.

"Who's that?" Sulochana opened the door with Keshav anna and Devki mavshi close on her heels. "Manjul? What's the matter?" she asked.

"Sulochana tai....will you hold Bayul to your breast for a while? She's been crying all day. Maybe' she'll stop if you feed her....?"

For a moment everyone was stunned. Then Keshav anna said "Go on, my child, hold that infant to your breast. They say that the mother who feeds the baby is greater than the one that gives birth. Go on. Your son will be blessed with a long life."

Sulochana took the child at once and held it to her breast. Bayul began to suck greedily, heaving sighs of contentment, snorting in pleasure from time to time. When she was full she fell asleep.

"Bring her here tomorrow....don't let her cry...." Sulochana handed the child back to Lila and they made their way back home.

"Sulochana didn't have a baby for five or six years after her marriage and her husband was going to marry again. They'd even found another girl, people say. Luckily she had a baby just in time...."

Lila was some six or seven years older than Manjul but she was a very sweet tempered person and the girls were the best of friends. She talked a lot and all the while her eyes seemed to smile, even her cantankerous sister-in-law didn't have a bad word to say about her. She was not very good looking though she was quite fair, but this did nothing to enhance her looks, it was her sweet nature that drew people to her.

Bayul was quite well for two days after this. Then suddenly her stomach began to puff up, her limbs turned

stiff and Manjul began to scream in fear. Salu ajji, who was somewhere nearby came running in. She ground some roots and fed paste to the child. This seemed to work for Bayul came back to her senses but soon she developed a fever and Salu ajji declared.

"Take this child to a doctor at once....now! Or we'll never be able to save her life!"

In a matter of moments all the people in the vaddo had gathered in the courtyard. Each of these men and women had carried the infant Bayul in their arms, they had taken her to their homes and played with her. In fact, the baby had been taken out of its house even before it was a month old! But these were ignorant people, they could lavish affection on the child because its mother was dead but they knew little about how it ought to be raised. If an infant is fed all sorts of food its stomach will get upset or it will begin to vomit....that was all they knew about raising babies.

They had to take the child to a doctor at once. There were no boats or motor cars that could take them to Karwar at this time of the night. So they decided to cross the river and take her to the doctor at Hulgey.

Vishnu, Khushali, Sadashiv, all decided to accompany Ganesh.

"Two of you go with him, why overload the boat?" Gokul mavshi asked. Crazy Vitobha wanted to go with them too but someone yelled at him and held him back. But there was no way anyone could hold Manjul.

"Don't go. It's very late. You 'll have to walk a long way. And then there's this river that must be crossed...." they all said to her but she kept sobbing "Bayul....O Bayul...." again and again.

She had not been separated from the child for an instant ever since Bayul was born and even when the neighbours took the baby to their houses for a while she would get restive and go and fetch her back again. "Oh! So the great mother's breasts are oozing milk, are they....?"

people teased. And here, they were wrapping Bayul up in a blanket and taking her away before her eyes!

"Appa....Oh Appa....!" Manjul hurtled after the men who were stepping out of the courtyard. "Let her come. She won't be able to rest in the house" Khushali finally said and they set off.

The whole region between the vaddo and the river consisted of newly ploughed fields and they had to walk carefully over the narrow embankments, past the stretches of hard boulders that had been tossed out of the fields and through furrows of soft loose earth. Sometimes someone lost his balance and fell into the mud but Ganesh held Bayul close and made his way carefully and Manjul walked close behind calling out to Bayul from time to time.

It was not totally dark for a thin sliver of moon sparkled on the far side, beyond the fort. Sometimes it floated behind masses of smoky clouds and then emerged from the other side. The sky overhead was bare, as though it had been wiped clean with a fistful of ashes. Only a few wisps of cloud floated about.

From the bushes on that distant embankment came a strange eerie cry. Was that a bird or animal, or was it a man? The cry pierced the still air and Manjul edged closer to her father. One of the old grandmothers in the vaddo had died recently. Her foot had swollen horribly and had become infected with pus. She would hobble about, groaning painfully whenever her sore foot touched the ground. When she died people said that she had become a ghost, they said they had heard it moaning and groaning just like she used to . Manjul remembered all this and was filled with fear. Vishnu and Khushali tried to keep her spirits up by talking to her, sometimes they stopped awhile to check how Bayul was.

When they reached the river they saw that the tide was low and a large expanse of the river bed was exposed on either side. The shrunken channel seemed like a river of darkness flowing through the black mud. This river that

wound its way amidst trees and bushes, rocks and hillocks now seemed to be flowing through an empty chasm. Manjul had always seen the mighty river gleaming in the sunshine as she gazed at it from her porch. The sight of this shrunken stream flowing through this expanse of foul smelling mud now filled her with dismay.

The boatman and his boat were nowhere to be seen. There were only three or four tiny thatched huts, in which a few fishermen lived with their families.

"Tarya maam....are you there.... ?" Khushali stepped forward. "he's taken someone across. Must be resting in the hut on the other bank" a woman's voice came from one of the huts.

Vishnu and Khushali began to call out loud across the expanse of water, "Tarya....Tarya.... Tarya....Ho.... Oo.... Oo....!"

"Oooo....ooo....Huuiiii....!" The response seemed to echo like waves in the darkness and they could hear some activity on the other bank followed by the swishing sound of oars slapping the water.

"Some strange fellow comes with this big red bull and says he wants to cross the river! Never set eyes on him before. Who knows whose bull he's stolen ! And then I'll get mixed up in all that mess!" The boatman was grumbling loudly. When he got closer he recognized the little group, "Why, it's you Ganesh mam! What's wrong?"

"My little one. She's burning with fever. We're taking her to the doctor." he said.

They rinsed their feet clean of the sticky black mud and the boatman helped them climb in. Vishnu took one oar and the boatman took the other and soon they were slicing through the water.

"Took someone across and then I just stayed there, talking. It seems they were moving one of those pans of boiling syrup at the jaggery factory when it slipped and the syrup fell on someone's legs. They took him to Karwar by launch in the afternoon."

"I'll be right here in this hut waiting for you. Tell the doctor Dev, the boatman, sent you. He's a good man. Only has a sharp tongue, but what can he do? Everyone who comes to him says he is too poor and cannot pay. The man has to live, doesn't he?"

When they had clambered up the bank they ran into Shivram, of Khargey village, squatting beside a big red bull which was tied to a tree. The light from the lantern in the boatman's hut fell on his face and Vishnu moved forward,

"Arrey, Shivram! Where to ?"

"Coming back from the Bhandi jatra at Majale. Had gone there to buy a bullock. But this boatman just won't take me across!"

"Didn't you join the military?"

"Was there fifteen years. Out on pension now. Want to farm my land. My brother has given me one bullock...."

Then Vishnu called out to the boatman, "Tarya mam....! This is Shivram of Kaargey village. We went to school together, to Dalvi Master's school. Take him across. The bull is young and strong....it'll easily swim across if you hold on to its rope....!"

When they got to the doctor's house it was past midnight. They saw him sprawled on a bed snoring loudly. Though each man was anxious about Bayul's condition not one had the courage to wake the doctor up.

A drunkard was stumbling down the street talking loudly to himself. He saw the group on the doctor's porch and came up to them.

"Doctor....! People dying here....and you snorrrre! From Halgey, Hulgey, from Shiddarrr....from Kinnarrr....they come. And you snorrrrrrrre!"

"Who' that mother .... now....?" The doctor got up cursing and turned up the wick in the lantern so that the whole place was bathed in light. He was wearing a soiled vest and a pair of knee length khaki shorts. He came out on to the porch brandishing a big stick.

"Now Rocky! Will you get out of here! Or do you want

another blow like you got the day before....?"

Rocky slunk off screaming "Salazhar murdabad! Salazhar murdabad!" and as he receded into the distance his shouts turned into drunken sobs.

"Wife went to her parents in Goa and suddenly they sealed the borders. Six months now, not a fly can get in or out. Here he's going mad waiting for her to return! Doesn't go to cut stone at the quarry any more..!"

Suddenly he noticed the group huddled on one side.

"Wretches! Not bothered whether it's day or night! Just get up and come!" he spluttered.

"Doctor, the child is sick."

"What's happened?"

The doctor took Bayul in his arms and went inside. He laid her on his bed and began to examine her in the light of a battery torch as they huddled outside the window full of concern.

"Ruined the child, that's what, ruined her totally! Even oxen have more sense than you people. And when she's nearly dead you bring her to a doctor. What for ? So that he can sprinkle water on a tulsi leaf and bid her die quickly?"

"Poor motherless waif, doctor!" Vishnu said.

"Her stomach is full of worms. Infants feeding on mother's milk don't suffer like this..." the doctor said as he fed Bayul some medicine and gave her an injection. The child screamed so loudly that Manjul began to cry and Khushali had to scold her to keep her quiet.

The doctor passed the child back to Ganesh. He gave him three pills wrapped in a piece of paper and a bottle with some red medicine in it. Then, laying a gentle hand on his shoulder he said

"Like a delicate flower, the child, and see what a state she is in ! Give her one pill each night. She'll get better. Give her buffalo milk and rice gruel and a banana every day..."

Ganesh nodded his head with a great deal of faith.

"Where have you come from?"

"Shiddar."

"Will the boat wait for you? ....Bring the child back if you can."

All of a sudden Khushali asked

"Doctor, are you staying here alone? Your wife....? Children?"

The doctor seemed to fly into a rage.

"Who'll stay in this wretched beggarly village of your's ?" he screeched rushing into the house.

"Why did you do that? Didn't you know that his wife left him ten years ago refusing to live in this village....?" Vishnu rebuked the man.

"I didn't ....no I didn't" Khushali was full of remorse beating on both his cheeks.

They had advanced a short way when they remembered that they hadn't paid the doctor. They hurried back but the doctor was fast asleep on his bed.

"Let's not wake him. I'll be coming this side in eight days for the temple festival here, the Mhari jatra. I'll give him the money then."

They began to hurry back towards the river, all the care and worry that had weighed them down all this while, considerably lightened. Vishnu even began to tease Manjul,

"I don't think that boatman will take you in, now."

"Why?"

"That big bull will be sitting in the boat....no place."

"No....!"

"Tell you something.... Hang on to that bull's tail real tight and jump into the river. Just don't let go...."

Bayul's fever was beginning to subside.

"Let's stay the night on this side of the river. My aunt stays quite close ...."

"No, no. The people in the vaddo will be sick with worry."

When they got to the river bank they found the

boatman huddled in his blanket within the boat's shadowy confines.

The bull and its owner had crossed the river and were nowhere in sight.

Manjul was quite confounded by the eerie darkness all around and the inky blackness of the water beneath but the boatman's booming voice soon put her fears at rest.

"Tarya mam, you haven't taken your share of the paddy from the people of our vaddo after the harvest this year."

"I'll come, I'll come some afternoon. After all we survive on the paddy you people give us each year."

It was about one in the night when they got back home. The people of the vaddo were still gathered in various courtyards and kitchens with lanterns by their side. What happened....What did the doctor say....everyone rushed forward when the little group came in sight.

"She's better now. Will get well soon. Fever has gone down, he's given medicine" Khushali said in a loud voice.

Manjul noticed with surprise that amongst those who had been waiting in their courtyard was Sadashiv anna, and he was the one who had fought so terribly with Appa about the common boundary between their fields! She drew out a mat and placed it beside Bayul and in a few minutes she, too, was asleep.

Manjul scooped out some rice from the rice pot to check if it was cooked. It was, so she went out into the hall to tell Appa that he could take the pot off the fire and drain the water from the rice. Appa was busy chopping a log of wood to make a new handle for the axe so she went back into the kitchen quietly.

She picked up the pot and tilted it gently to let the excessive water over the cooked rice to flow out. Suddenly

it slipped from her hands and fell to the ground shattering into shards. The rice splattered all over the floor and the hot water fell on her feet too, but she remained silent, terrified that Appa would yell at her for breaking the mud pot.

"What's that, Manjul? What broke?" Ganesh called out hearing the sound, but she was too terrified to reply. He hurried in and saw the mess on the ground with the hot steam rising from the freshly cooked rice.

"How many times have I told you not to take the pot off the fire?" he demanded. Then, in a soft voice he asked "Bai, did the hot water fall on you?"

"No Appa." Manjul hid her feet beneath her skirt.

"Gather that rice and put it aside. We'll feed it to the ox. This mother of your's, went away leaving us to wallow in trouble!"

"People say she's fortunate, died when her husband was still alive ...but what of us? And our problems?" he muttered as though to himself. "A widow might still be able to survive on this earth but a man whose wife is dead ...God! How terrible is his fate!"

Ganesh looked around the house littered with baskets, coils of rope, winnowing fans and so many articles of common use, not one of which was neatly in its place. The floor was cracked and its surface rough and jagged —— it had not been smoothed with mud and dung for so many months!

That night as he lay in bed Ganesh reflected that Manjul had seemed to be limping all day. Did the hot rice water fall on her foot...I should have checked, he thought in dismay as he got up and went to where she lay. Sure enough her right foot was red and covered with large blisters. He sat there as though he were weeping tears of self reproach, then, making a paste of sandalwood and water he applied it on her sore foot.

"Does it hurt, Bai? why didn't you tell me then?'

Manjul whimpered softly and Ganesh felt like drawing

her close so that both of them could weep and lighten the load of sorrow that they shared. His eyes strayed to the seven month old Bayul who slept blissfully, quite free of cares and worries. At least she's lucky, she has a mother in Manjul, but what of us ? We are like orphans ... He thought.

Ganesh was sitting at the edge of his courtyard rolling up a strip of blanket when he noticed Yashwant creeping away quietly past Bhaskar's house. This couple was insisting that I got married again, but see how he is avoiding me now! He called out to Yashwant and the man came in reluctantly, avoiding his eyes and trying to make small talk. "Ganesh, this beam on your porch is worn out. Change it ...or it 'll just collapse ..."

"Let it, Let things collapse ..! Here everything's going to be ruined soon ...who cares for that beam!"

A shower of wooden fragments fell out as Yashwant tapped the beam sharply with his palm.

"See?" he said.

"Come and sit here quietly" Ganesh snapped at the man and finally Yashwant came and squatted by his side. In a small voice he said,

"These girls! Today they want husbands who are in the army ... Nothing else will do ..."

"Did you go and check?"

"Abole went. Three times. She tried to explain, but they keep saying the same thing. You have two daughters. And you're not rich enough ..."

"Not rich enough..! But I cultivate my own fields, I sow seven Khanis of paddy! I don't toil on someone else's land. And see these coconut palms here, they give enough to feed a whole household!"

"Who cares about all that today? And if you own fields you have to toil in them, get baked by the sun and drenched by the rain. These modern girls want to marry

sepoys in the army so that they can go and live comfortably far away ..."

Both men remained silent for a while. Then Ganesh asked,

"Is the girl good looking Yashwant?"

"Yes. Sturdy. And dark. But nothing like what Anusuya vhanni used to be !'

"If only they would agree ..At least she'd look after the house. And these two innocent children ...they need support, how much can I do alone?"

Yashwant didn't say another word. Suddenly Ganesh began to rave,

"Two girls, she says! What can I do about that now? Everyone used to praise Lakshumi ...say she was as sweet and as good as honey. But what did she do? The wretch dropped two girl babies into my lap and went away herself! What do I do with them now? If it weren't for them I'd go to the Kali river at high tide and jump in some day!"

Yashwant began to feel uncomfortable and got to his feet.

"Yashwant, the Soon month is almost on us. Time for the Dhalo festival ... The spirit of the Shiv Shambho Bandhav always appears in your body ...the Dhalo will take place this year too, won't it?"

"If the Spirit wants to manifest itself on earth it certainly will. It will drag whomever it chooses straight to the maand. But let me tell you Ganesh, when Anusuya vhanni came to the maand it seemed to become more holy and beautiful ...she was our beloved sister, the spirit of sister Chakraivant always made her body its home ...wonder whom the spirit will choose this year!"

The Soon month was one in which no crops were sown, no foundations were laid for building new houses or cattle sheds, no talk of marriage alliances was conducted in fact it was a period when no auspicious task was taken up in the village. The daughters-in-law and other

womenfolk got a bit of rest after the rigours of the harvest. The men would sprawl lazily by the fire or in the patches of sunshine or sit and gossip under the palm frond canopies in each other's courtyards. The women would go to visit their parents or celebrate the Dhalo festival.

The Dhalo had been celebrated in this vaddo of Shiddar village for the last four years. There was an unwritten rule that the Dhalo, when performed in a village would have to be continued for seven years. The maand or clearing where the Dhalo was celebrated lay to the east of the vaddo in an empty field. The ground had been beaten smooth and smeared with dung. In the middle of the clearing was the tulsi plant around which the twenty-one Rambhas would dance and leap and exhort the gods.

When darkness fell a gas light would be hung on a post and the women would sing and dance in its light. Someone would beat on a dhol and as the drumbeats gained in frenzy some of the women would stop singing and begin to jump about as though in a trance. They would come to the center of the maand and identify themselves, if one was Nagaivant, another was Chakraivant, yet another was Ijjaivant. There were twenty-one sisters in all, the eldest being Tulsaivant and the youngest Mankaivant and there were two brothers Pundalik Bandhav and Shiv Shambho Bandhav.

Then there was the keeper of the maand, the Maand Dhani who would rush round and round the periphery guarding it from evil spirits. And the spirit of the Nagbal would enter a young boy's body making him writhe and slither about the edges of the maand.

It is said that once when Nagaivant was roaming in the forest a serpent, infatuated by her beauty, began to chase her. When she slipped and fell to the ground the serpent coiled itself around her body and squirted its poison into her mouth. Thus, the Nagbal was born. The other sisters looked after the infant and if by chance his spirit was late

in manifesting itself in a little boy's form they would get most agitated, but Nagaivant took no interest in the child and was never perturbed.

The lamp was shining by the maand and someone was beating softly on the dhol. The women had not yet gathered at the site and the singing was yet to begin. Ganesh, sitting in the hall saw the rays of light slicing through the moonless darkness of this night in the month of Soon, perhaps there are ghosts dancing in the darkness beyond, he thought. Anusuya will not be at the maand, this year, we will not hear her sing!

Manjul served dinner to her father and ate a bit herself. She was impatient to finish all her work and rush to the maand but Bayul just wouldn't go to sleep.

"Bring Bayul here. You go." Ganesh suggested and Manjul brought the child to him, placed a lamp by his side and rushed off towards the maand.

"Take a blanket with you...it's cold out there. And don't join the dance ...you're still very young" he called out but she had vanished into the darkness.

There was quite a crowd gathered at the maand. People sat with sheets and blankets drawn over their heads and Manjul, huddled in the crowd of women thought that she should have brought her blanket too. All around was the inky blackness of a moonless night, and here, right in the middle was this glorious pool of light. The muted singing of the women, the soft beats of the dhol—all this transformed the place and gave it the appearance of an assembly fit for the gods.

The women began to sing. Their voices filtered through the boughs of the mango trees and the canopy of palm fronds and reached Ganesh's ears. How well Anusuya used to sing! Her voice was strong and honey sweet, at a pitch above the other voices, he could make it out clearly even from this distance!

The singing and the drumbeats took on an added tempo as the song, where the women from the eighteen

surrounding villages introduced themselves, got underway.

What is the village you hail from, my ladies,
What is the village you hail from?
MAJALE is the village we hail from, my lady,
MAJALE, the village we hail from!
What sort of carriage did you ride on, my ladies,
What sort of carriage did you ride on?
A CHARIOT ! That's what we rode on, my lady,
A CHARIOT! That's what we rode on!
What is the village you hail from, my ladies,
What is the village you hail from?
KHARGEY is the village we hail from, my lady,
KHARGEY is the village we hail from!
What sort of carriage did you ride on, my ladies,
What sort of carriage did you ride on?
A fine HORSE! That's what we rode on, my lady,
A fine HORSE! That's what we rode on!

The song continued with the various women who had married into Shiddar village exuberantly shouting out the names of the villages where their parents lived. Ganesh listened to the recitation of names, his heart besieged by thoughts of his dead wife.

The women then launched into an invocation to the various deities worshipped in the village, seeking the blessings of Ramnath and Shanteri, Mahamaya, Narshinv ...rounding off with invocations to the lesser Spirits, and the guardian of the village frontiers, the Kshetrapal. Meanwhile the singing took on a new frenzy, the drummers pounded harder on the dhol and one by one the invoked spirits took possession of the various women who began to leap about on the maand. The two Bandhavs leapt up from where they say amongst the men, the Maand Dhani began rushing around the periphery and the Nagbal writhed and slithered on the ground.

But where was Chakraivant? The other Sisters were getting agitated,

'Beloved sister, O Chakraivant !
Sweet as a flower, O Chakraivant!
Break through the clouds
Skirt the ocean, cross the hills
Come soon! O Sister Chakraivant!....
Ssshooo ....sshhhhoo....shooo....! They hissed.
'Barmo....Indra ....gods guard her way
worry not .... she'll come .... Pundalik and Shiv Shambho consoled their sisters, rushing about, hissing loudly as though looking all around.

The maand Dhani rushed about more frantically than before. "Thirty three crore deities in the heaven above fetch my child .... safe and sound.... shhooo.... shhhhooo.... shooo....

Ijjaivant began to dance in a frenzy as though she would release a thunderbolt on to the earth, Nagaivant writhed and slithered like a snake with her cupped palms raised hood-like above her head while Mankaivant and the others invoked the gods and called out to their sister again and again.

Suddenly there was a commotion amongst the people seated to the right of the maand. "Move aside .... Give her room...." they cried. The drums beat louder and faster. Manjul began twitching and swaying her head, hissing loudly all the while. She leapt on to the maand twirling her hands and moving her head round and round like a wheel. She was an insignificant slip of a child, eleven or twelve years old, yet when the Spirit came upon her she assumed a commanding persona. And when the maand Dhani sprinkled water on her from the pot by the tulsi she suddenly broke into song.

'O Tulsaivant! Elder sister mine!
Bless your sister Chakraivant.
Searched the sky....the earth .... for a human
From.... ssshhhooo.... ssshhhoo.... sshhhhoooo....! She hissed. Then Chakraivant saluted the various gods and deities twirling her head and her hands round and round

as she leapt about the maand.

The lamp had long since gone out and Ganesh sat in the darkness savouring the strains of music and the songs that floated towards him. Keshav stopped by his door to tell him that the spirit of Chakraivant had manifested itself in Manjul's body. Ganesh remained silent for a while, setting the lamp alight.

"The spirit wanted the mother's body all these years. Now it wants the daughter's."

"Yes, Chakraivant and Nagaivant. They say these are the most powerful, and the most blessed of all the Spirits," Keshav agreed.

"Sit here for a while Keshav, the younger one is asleep. Must go and pluck some flowers, She's a Rambha, one of the dancers in Lord Indra's court! Must be welcomed with flowers when she gets home! Her mother needed lots of flowers when the Dhalo was being celebrated."

Suman was a thin sickly child at the age of four, only her belly seemed to protrude from her skinny frame. Her head drooped and the skin of her chest stuck to the bones beneath. Even her complexion was pale, like milk. Manjul was forever scared that she would fall ill..

No one could say any longer that she was like this because she was a poor motherless waif for Manjul did everything in her power to look after her as a mother would. When she was nine or ten months old Bayul aroused her sister's maternal instincts and these were present in Manjul in so great a proportion that she could lavish all the care and affection on the child that their mother would have.

Her father didn't do much to help her, though. His wife was dead and the scars in his heart would not heal. Stubborn and taciturn by nature, Ganesh held Suman responsible for his plight and all his anger and bitterness was directed towards the child.

The people in the vaddo rushed to her aid whenever she called, that was a consolation to Manjul, but they were all preoccupied with their own work. There were the summer crops and the winter crops, the little gardens, the tracts of hay, the cows and the buffaloes that took up their time. Besides, they were a thrifty race, not a grain of paddy nor a stalk of hay would be allowed to go waste. Even the hollow grains that had scattered with the chaff were collected painstakingly and put to use. Yet they could never make ends meet.

The presence of her father should have been a source of comfort to Bayul and she should have begun to thrive ... yet she remained a sickly child. No wonder people say a mother, and the love and sustenance she provides along with the milk she feeds her infant are crucial for a child's well being!

Lila came to visit her parents for the first time a whole year after she got married. Manjul had been upset for many months after she had gone and memories of the happy days they had spent together, kept filling her mind. Lila tai and she would gather reeds and wild flowers from the bushes on the river bank and then they'd distribute the kandla flowers amongst the women in the vaddo. The sweet smell of the flowers which the women wore in their hair would then hang over the vaddo all that day.

Manjul was inconsolable the day Lila tai went away with her husband. She'd stood by the gateway sobbing for half an hour till someone finally dragged her to the bathroom and washed her face. She didn't like Lila tai's husband either. Tall, dark, with sunken cheeks, his head jutted forward like a horse, she thought. And when she spoke to him and called him 'Bhavoji' he merely grunted in reply.

He was a forest guard in the dense jungles around

Yellapur. He took Lila with him to his official quarters in the middle of the jungle.

"What a thick forest that is ..tall, tall trees that seem to touch the sky! And in the middle is this clearing with just two houses. Wild buffaloes graze here even in the daytime! Once I'd gone to draw water when this big creature rushed out from behind a tree, his nostrils flaring ...I left the water pot in the well and ran..!"

Manjul listened to her words with rapt attention.

"Another day I nearly died! I had this hen which used to sit on her eggs in a basket which I'd hung from the roof. One day the hen began to cackle so I went to put my hand in the basket but something made me suspicious. So I climbed on the window ledge and peeped into the basket and my god! What a big snake that was, coiled around the eggs! We were just two women over there, the men had gone to work. We began to scream and a couple of men from the kunbi settlement nearby came rushing to help. They pulled the basket down and killed the snake. But all the eggs got destroyed!"

Earlier Lila was quite plump but now she had lost a lot of weight. She looked much fitter now but her rosy complexion was a thing of the past.

"You've become thin."

"Can't eat a morsel of rice without fish. But he only brings fish on Sundays when he goes to Yellapur. All those trees and that darkness! At night everything seems to close in on me and I'm scared."

"Scared! Your husband is by your side, what are you scared of then?"

He's a man of the forest. Picks up his scythe and his packet of food and sets off in the morning. Comes back at night. My neighbour, Lalitavva, newly married then, suddenly fell ill. She would sob uncontrollably and cling to me. Someone called this woman who ground all sorts of roots and leaves and made some medicine. She got better but when they told her to go to the village for some time she

refused to leave her husband alone in the forest. If she had gone I would have come away too. I wouldn't stay there alone!"

They spoke of this and of that and suddenly Lila asked, "Manjul, have you got your period, yet? Who was with you, the first time?"

Manjul giggled, embarrassed.

"It was harvest time. No one was there in the vaddo. I was chopping pumpkin when ...I got up and began to cry. Bayul saw me crying and she started to cry, too. But you'd explained everything, so..."

Lila had brought a whole lot of things from Yellapur—plantains and betel nuts and honey ...She'd brought a big bottle of honey for Bayul.

"Give her one spoonful every day. See how her problems vanish." She said. Manjul did just that and sure enough, the child's health began to improve. All who saw her said, it's true, as a child grows older it's body fills up and it's health naturally, improves.

Meerg passed and the month of Arudra began. The sky became a canopy of thick, dark clouds. A stiff wind blew and rain fell in torrents throughout the night and day. The fields were covered with water. If it had been raining only over this village the water would have run into the river and flowed away, But it was raining heavily on all sides, who knew in which distant corner these dark clouds crashed against each other bringing forth these squalls!

One evening a huge wave of water began to flow towards the vaddo. A strong wind blew from the opposite direction and it seemed to hold the water in check. Before their very eyes the whole area between the hillocks at Shiddar and Hulgey and Hulgey and Kerwadi villages turned into a massive expanse of water. It was like a vast boundless lake, something that had existed in primordial times.

The people of the vaddo screamed and called out to each other as they gathered their families about them and rushed towards the hillock, it was fortunate that all their cattle sheds stood on high ground, on the slopes of the hillock, only Sadashiv had ignored people's warnings and built his cattle shed close to his house. He began to run towards the shed to untie the cattle but someone held him back, save the lives of your wife and children first, they urged, dragging him away.

They had stepped into the water when it was waist high but by the time they reached the fields in the middle section the water rose up to their necks and Ganesh had to hold Suman above the water level as he made his way.

Some people clutched small bundles which kept floating away. But the saddest story was that of Vishnu's wife Dasmati and the old trunk which her father had given her on his death bed. She kept her treasured possessions in it—a shawl which her brother had brought her from Mumbai, a silver waist chain which her son who had died at the age of five had worn, the yellow silk dhoti her husband wore when he worshipped the gods. She lifted the trunk on to her head but Vishnu threw it on the threshold and dragged her away. Dasmati kept turning back again and again for another look.

The seventy or eighty people who lived in that vaddo scrambled to safety in ones and twos and then looked around to check that everyone had arrived. Children screamed. Old men and women called out to the gods. Ambika couldn't see her son Manu anywhere so she rushed screaming into the water but someone found the child just in time and dragged her back.

They were all soaked to the skin. The thought of where they would spend the night, what they would eat began to plague each one of them. The rain poured down in a continuous stream from the masses of clouds overhead and at their feet lay this vast ocean of water that had swallowed everything. They could not tell if the water of

the river was still rising. This seemed like the end of creation, surely no living thing could take root in this place ever again?

The vaddo was engulfed in water and only the tops of the trees could be seen. That mighty pipal that seemed to touch the sky was no more than an umbrella on the surface of the water. The elders sat there, shocked. Such a mighty flood had never taken place in all their years.

Darkness began to settle down on the land and with it the energy drained from their bodies. They huddled together in their wet clothes, cold, almost composed. There was no passion left in them, only worry seemed to take its place. It was as though each man had been looted of everything he held dear, who could he accuse, whom would he mourn?

In a little while people from the other vaddos came as though to take stock. They took their relatives and acquaintances home with them. Ganesh and his children found shelter in Mukund's house. Only Soyru refused to go to anyone's house. He took his wife and children to their cattleshed. We'll stay on the loft, in our own space, why should we live on another's charity, he said.

Ganesh was not related to Mukund in any way, but in the old days before his wife died he'd go to Mukund's house to partake of the ritual meal when Mukund carried out the rituals to satisfy his ancestor's spirits every year. Or he'd drop in when he went to the cattle shed or to buy something in a shop in that part of the village.

Mukund had two sons, one worked in Mumbai, the other was in the police force at Karwar. A man of few words, there was an air of contentment on his face, always, but his wife talked in excess. She was a simple woman though, and a stern glance from him was enough to shut her up. The couple looked after the children very well. Mukund's wife tore up an old sari for them to wrap around themselves. How shy Manjul was in this attire!

The whole area remained underwater for thirteen

days. The people would squat on the embankment and stare at the place where their homes had been. At first they used to talk, but as time passed they just sat there in silence.

"If a house catches fire you can at least try to put it out. But this..! Swallowed everything... And there's nothing we can do!" Bhaskar burst out agitatedly.

'This water will go down, then we'll have to set up the vaddo again! The handiwork of so many generations has been destroyed! Our children's inheritance ...all gone..!' Ram ajjo wailed.

"At least our elders taught us to build stone houses, Ram ajja, if the walls had been of mud they'd have collapsed in no time!"

"Who knows what has happened by now? The walls are of stone, true, but they're lined with mud. Who's used cement to bind the stones?"

"God, let the houses stand! We'll pinch our bellies and go without food as we build our lives again, but if the houses don't remain, then what....?"

"This is the land we used to fight over! Quarrel over every inch!

And now what remains....?"

"When men do things that go against religion .... this is what happens....!"

Sadashiv was plagued by thoughts of the buffaloes in his cattleshed.

"What a fine pair of animals..God! ..Should have untied them at least, they could have tried to swim and then drowned!" he wailed.

Hulgey village stood right on the river bank. Now, covered by water, it was difficult to believe that a village had ever existed at that site.

One day some government officials came from Karwar bringing relief items loaded on bullock carts. They handed out packets of food but there was little enthusiasm amongst the people of the vaddo. Only Soyru hung out of his

cattleshed calling out to the relief officials, that they were not to be forgotten.

On the thirteenth day the water began to recede. The people began to take stock of the situation and moved towards the vaddo. The fields were knee deep in sand and slush, the crops had rotted and not a blade of grass was to be seen. The whole area stood desolate and bare as though the earth had turned into an extensive burial ground and the stench of rotting vegetation hung heavy in the air. Only the river flowed quietly in its channel, like a serpent that had released its poison and then quietly slithered away.

Sadashiv rushed towards his cattleshed, which had collapsed in a heap. Beneath the debris lay the carcasses of the buffaloes, their bellies grotesque and swollen. His wife and he sat there mourning the animals till the overpowering stench forced them away.

The strangest thing was that except for Neelkanth's house all the other houses in the vaddo remained upright. There was a lot of destruction, no doubt, some people's roofs had been blown away, while some houses had developed cracks in the walls. The inside walls of some houses had collapsed, yet the external structure remained intact. The rice, paddy and pulses stocked in the houses had sprouted in the water and were beginning to rot.

Appa, Manjul and Suman stood in the courtyard and looked around. The whole vaddo seemed to have just emerged from the bowels of the earth and everything in it appeared to be in ruins. The ridge gourd creeper which Manjul had propped against the coconut palm lay in a rotten heap on the ground. Only a few twigs remained of the hibiscus in the garden and the thatched roof of the bathroom had blown off, god knows where, leaving just the poles standing in place.

They walked into the house fearfully wondering what was in store, but only the mud wall of the middle room had collapsed. Ganesh knew this would happen, so he was relieved. Poor Dasmati! For eight days she searched

high and low for the trunk they had dropped on their threshold, finally locating it in the middle of a distant field. She spent much of the time during the next few days setting her treasured possessions out to dry.

The only house in the vaddo to have escaped any sort of destruction was Bhaskar's home. Built of solid stone, this two storied structure was as massive and as impregnable as a fort.

All the stocks of grain in the houses were destroyed and the standing crops in the fields, too, were ruined. The government gave fifty rupees and four measures of rice to each household. The men left the families to fend for themselves and rushed to surrounding villages, to Hankon and Asnoti, to Majali and Mudgeri to see if they could procure seeds or seedlings to sow in their fields.

The fields were a mass of sand and slush and it was impossible to plough them as the bullock's feet would sink into the ground. People dug little pits with their spades and tossed in the seeds. Others who managed to get seedlings transplanted them into the soil. Some seven or eight villages in the area had borne the brunt of the floods.

Ganesh went to his cousin Sada in Majale and returned with five bundles of young plants. Sada uprooted a whole portion of his field and gave the plants to Ganesh. But even this did not cover more than a quarter of his land.

The Great Flood served to change the whole face of this region. The entire Hulgey village was re-built at the foot of the hillock. Neelkanth refused to rebuild his house in the vaddo. He built a fence around his little garden patch in the vaddo and built a new house by his cattleshed on the hill slope.

People toiled hard that whole rainy season, coming home only to shelter their heads from the rain or to sup on a frugal meal of rice gruel. It took them a year and a half to get over this setback. Ganesh repaired the wall in his house with his daughter's help. They brought home the clay from the fields and stamped and kneaded it till it was

soft. Then Manjul fashioned big balls of clay and passed them to her father and he slapped them into position and re-built the wall.

"Appa, let's send Bayul to school."

"The school is in the upper vaddo, near the temple. What will happen when it rains, when the fields and the stream are full?"

"Jairam anna is starting a school in our vaddo this year. On the upper floor in Bhaskar dada's house. He's called the children tomorrow. Wants two measures of paddy or one measure of rice every month,"

"Why? Doesn't the government pay a salary?"

"No .Not for two years, it seems."

Ganesh remained silent.

"Let her go, Appa. She'll read a few books. It will help."

Manjul went to the shop and bought a slate and a piece of chalk and took Suman to the upper room in Bhaskar anna's house the next day. The door was decorated with a torana of fresh leaves and flowers. Jairam anna had a sandal paste mark on his brow and a flower was tucked behind his ear as though he had just finished worshipping the gods. Some ten or twelve children were seated before him and they had sandal paste on their foreheads too. A platter of coconut pieces mixed with jaggery stood before him and he offered this to all who came to the room. He then handed the plate to one of the bigger boys and sent him to offer the sweets to everyone in the vaddo.

Manjul and Suman ate the coconut too but Suman refused to sit in the class. She kept crying loudly and running after Manjul, so Jairam anna asked Manjul to sit there too. A fair boy dressed in clean clothes sat beside them, smiling at everyone. Manjul didn't recognise him.

"What's your name?"

"Govind."

"Where are you from? Jairam anna, who's this boy?"

"Bhaskar dada's nephew, his sister's son. Brought him here to put him in school. Gave us this upper room so that his beloved nephew could go to school." Jairam anna smiled.

Suman began to play with Govind and Manjul stole away. She saw Soyru dada enter the courtyard in a foul mood.

"Arrey Jairam! Think you are too smart, do you? See if I don't stop all this! No calling the village elders, no saying a word to anyone, just gets up and starts a school! What do you think, this vaddo is your father's empire, or what?"

Jairam anna hurried down the stairs.

"What's the matter, Soyru dada?"

"And he asks what's the matter, indeed! Did you inform the villagers before you started this school? People inform each other and seek advice before they set up a wedding tent in this vaddo...and you! Such a big step....a school...that too, in secret. Like a thief!"

"It's a good thing I'm doing, Soyru dada, the children will learn to read, they'll turn wise."

"Don't teach me wisdom! When were you born...I ask you, when were you born? Studied seven classes and stepped into a pair of pants and you think you know everything! Running a school is the government's job. I tell you, not one child will come here tomorrow."

"If you want, I'll call the villagers, but no one will object to something good."

Soyru paid no attention to his words.

"Wants to collect rice and paddy from the children! All set to loot us! I'll see who gives anything!"

Bhaskar was just inside his house and could hear everything. He came out, irritated.

"That's enough, Soyru. The school is in my house. Whether I run a school here or do anything else, it doesn't concern you."

"But the students are the children from the vaddo. I'll

see who comes from tomorrow. I'll break each one's legs..!"

"Don't send the children, then. I'll run the school only for my nephew, I'll pay the teacher myself!"

"Nephew! His beloved nephew! Tried everything and when nothing worked he's brought his nephew here or the whole estate will pass out of their hands!"

"That's enough now, Soyru. Just get out of here or I'll break your bones!" Bhaskar grabbed a stout stick and advanced menacingly but Soyru didn't wait there any longer.

"Your father and grand father grabbed the land at dirt cheap rates when their brothers and cousins were in trouble! This land won't remain your's for long...some outsider will swallow it all up" he screeched as he fled.

When he had gone Bhaskar explained to the people who had gathered there, "This fellow's son is in the seventh class this year. He had hopes of starting a school in the vaddo for the boy."

Manjul was quite upset by all that had happened. She ran upstairs and dragged Suman away. Jairam was busy talking to someone. One by one the other children slipped away too. Only the platter used for worship, the water pot and the oil lamp in front of the gods remained in the room. And then there was Jairam and Govind, Bhaskar's sister's son.

Jairam was a short, swarthy youngster seventeen or eighteen years of age. Soft spoken and hesitant, people often wondered if he was really capable of doing all that he said he would. His brother was in the army and kept sending money home. His mother refused to let this younger son go out of the village.

Jairam, too, was very attached to his mother and to the village. He'd never stepped out since the day he was born and even now he showed no desire to lead any other sort of life.

Every morning, in his khaki shorts and white shirt he'd

set about getting the children together. If he saw a child playing in a courtyard he'd drag him to the bathroom and wash his face. He'd fetch the child's clothes and force him into them and then drag the youngster to school..

Most of the children had to take tea and bhakris out to their fathers working in the fields. Jairam would lie in wait on the embankment or in the alley and as soon as the children caught sight of him they would slip away. A child who was playing in a courtyard or in a kitchen would suddenly vanish. Then Jairam would take a lamp and climb on the loft to look for him.

It was a common sight to see Jairam grabbing a couple of them by their arms, with yet another two or three herded before him marching all the way to school. It was also a common sight to see that at least one child would be in tears.

Thus Jairam ran his school every day with the five or six children, he dragged along and another five or six who came there of their own accord. Then he hit upon another plan to draw the children to school. He bought a kilo of jaggery and cut it into little pieces. Every day, when school gave over he handed a piece to each child in the room.

He'd asked the children's parents for paddy and for rice but no one ever brought him even a small measure of grain. Only Bhaskar set aside a whole khandi of paddy when the new crop was threshed and Jairam carried it home on his head. Suddenly, one day the Inspector of schools paid him a visit. After that the room really took on the appearance of a school, he was referred to as Jairam master and he began to get a salary from the government. The first time he got his pay of three hundred rupees he organized a Satya Narain puja and distributed prasad amongst the villagers. He also bought a black board and some maps for the walls of the school room.

Soyru's daughter-in-law Shobha rushed into the room and

stood there nervously clutching something in the folds of her sari.

"What's the matter, Shobha vaini?" Manjul asked.

Shobha giggled quietly. Her eyes shone brightly as peals of laughter bubbled out of her pretty lips. Manjul ran a hand gently over shobha's belly.

"So, did Shanker bhau leave this riddle for you to solve when he went away this time..?" she asked.

Shobha giggled again like a creeper laden with flowers rustling in the breeze. She loosened the folds of her sari and a bundle dropped to the ground.

"What's this vaini?"

"Some raw rice. Let's grind it and make thali peet." She took out two rupees, "And this is for the coconut and the jaggery."

"I've got that. But doesn't Parvati mavshi feed you well at home?"

"What sort of food is that...parboiled rice! And have you ever eaten her humman or her shaak? But what can she do? My father-in-law ties the store keys to the chain around his waist. What tasty food my mother cooks...I keep thinking of that..!"

Slim and petite, Shobha vaini stood before Manjul like a little child begging for food. She must be as old as Manjul, though. Married to Shanker last year she came to this village from her home in Baad near Karwar. Shanker was in the army. There is a certain poise that surrounds city bred girls and this was evident in Shobha too. Slim and dusky, with bright sparkling eyes and a smile always playing about her petal-like lips, Shobha was no longer a girl, but she was not a mature woman either.

Manjul assembled the grinding stones in the kitchen and they ground the rice into flour. Then she kneaded the jaggery, coconut and flour together and adding the sliced onion fried the thali peets on the griddle pouring oil liberally over them.

"Vaini, shall I ask you a riddle?"

"Ask, Just like your Shanker bhau ! He says my cheeks are like sweet mangoes! And he keeps tugging on my braid, says it's like the rope around the oxen's neck!"

"And you let him suck on the mangoes, don't you?"

"That 's enough now" Shobha smiled shyly. "What sweet letters he writes! I sit by the haystack and read them..I feel so shy..!"

"Your hair is really lovely, so thick and like silk! If you leave it open and draw it around you no one will even know if you take off your sari and blouse!"

"Rubbish! Ask your riddle, now."

"No, my stomach is full, just listening to your riddles!"

As they sat there eating the thali peet Shobha passed a hand lightly over Manjul's breasts.

"How full they are" She observed. "He keeps saying I have no breasts at all."

A shadow moved outside the door and Manjul rushed out to check. She saw Parvati mavshi, Shobha's mother-in-law coming to their door.

"Did Shobha come here? The wretch! God knows where she's gone...and for such a long time!"

"But she took the basket and went to gather dung."

"The basket's lying in the courtyard ..."

"She took ours. Just picked it up and walked off. No asking for permission...nothing! And if I protest she says she'll tell Shanker bhau..!"

"All right..all right..she'll give it back." Parvati mavshi turned away. "What's that you're cooking ..nice rich smell..."

"Nothing ...just some stuff for Appa.."

"You've learnt to cook well...you'll turn your husband from a twig into a stout branch very soon.."

"And what if he's a stout branch right at the start..?"

"Then he'll see that you don't get too smart for him."

Parvati mavshi turned away. Manjul realized that Suman was standing right behind her. She was terrified that the child might say something and give the game

away but she remained silent. Shobha giggled helplessly.

"My mother-in-law's a simple woman, really. And her son is just like her. But my father-in-law! I'm really scared of him..."

"Why?"

"He's not good... Let me take your basket and collect some dung, now..."

The following year Jairam master made his students put up a little play at the annual function arranged by the district authorities. One boy, the zamindar, sat on stage dressed in a dhoti and a coat with a turban on his head. Another boy stood before him, bare bodied, with only a cloth around his waist and a ragged blanket across his shoulders. This was the ryot or tenant farmer pleading inability to pay the landlord his share of the crop.

"How do I give you your share, O Master,
How do I give you your share?
A tiger ate up my ox, O Master,
So I could not plough my field!
How do I give you your share, O Master,
How do I give you your share?
My wife was ill with fever, O Master, so
I could not hoe the field!"

The ryot then talked of how the rains had failed and how they had eaten up all their stock of paddy when the landlord demanded,

"If you don't have paddy give me seeds"

"There're no seeds left, O Master!"

"If you don't have seeds give me the pots... the containers...the other possessions in your house..."

"There's nothing left in my house O Master!"

"Borrow money, then."

"But I'm deeply in debt ..."

"Get off my land, then, I take it back ..."

The Zamindar rolled up the reed matting on stage and walked off with the roll under his arm while the poor tenant farmer wept quietly.. The play was acted very well and everyone appreciated it. Only the Chief Guest, the Chairman of the District Board of Schools was beside himself with rage.

When Jairam went to get the annual grant for his school from the Board's office that year the Inspector said,

"Master, are you a Communist?"

"What?"

"The Chairman of the Board ...he's a big Zamindar of Karwar. His land stretches from Karwar and Baad to Hulgey. Are you rousing the farmers against him?

"Oh no ..no Sir! That was just a play. It's been done in the village so many times..."

"This is between you and the Chairman, then. He's cancelled your grant. Don't come here again..."

Jairam was desperate. He'd meant to sculpt a Ganapati but had created a monkey instead! He rushed to Karwar but the imposing fortress like house, the high walls and the ostentation frightened him so much that he returned by the evening launch without meeting the Chairman. .

"That's Ghanshyam Shenoy, your mama. Farms five khannis of his land and gives him his share every year without fail. Go see what he can do." Jairam's mother advised.

Jairam went to his uncle's house at Hulgey the next day. "Come back in four days. I'll be going there to give the landlord his share of the rice ...we'll talk to him then. He won't refuse."

And it happened just as he had said. Placing the bundle of newly harvested rice on the verandah Jairam's mama pleaded with the Zamindar and finally brought him around.

Suman remained in Jairam's school for four years. Then, together with Govind and a few other boys she started going to the main school in the village, beside the temple. She was the only girl in the fifth class where the medium of studies was Kannada.

All the boys sat on a bench, but Suman had to sit on a little stool on one side. She couldn't understand why this was so. She didn't like it one bit. Things were so much better in Jairam master's school where all the students were her cousins, the only exception being Govind, Bhaskar anna's nephew. She could wriggle in where she pleased, pinching whoever came in the way, but here..! She wanted to run away from this place.

Though weak and sickly as a child Suman was now strong and mischievous and would rush up and down the stairs in Jairam master's school. He kept complaining to Manjul about her pranks. When Bhaskar went to get a set of books for Govind, Manjul asked him to buy a set for Suman too. She stitched a cloth bag for her to carry the books.

One day, on their way to school when Govind had just crossed the narrow plank that bridged the stream, Suman called out from behind,

"Look! Govind...look ...!"

He turned around to see her rush on to the bridge. Halfway across she lost her balance and fell into the water. She bobbed up and down a few times and then scrambled out but the bag of books was nowhere to be seen. She began to cry loudly.

"Suman, take my books. I'll tell mama they fell into the water ...he'll buy me a new set", Govind said. But Suman refused to listen and returned home.

There was no one at home. Manjul had gone to the field to help appa break the clods of earth. Suman went to the hay stacks that stood by the vaddo and taking off her dress spread it out to dry. She sat there in the hay, quite beside herself with fright ..what would Bai say, and Appa,

and the master? Where would she get books for school, now?

But who wants to go to that school, anyway? That Aigal master, how he yells! Doesn't let you move from your place. Keeps making you read and write. And screams because I can't do sums! As for Suresh! What airs he puts on because he's good with his sums!

.... I told Bai the other day I wanted to go to mama's place, to Kerwadi for the jatra but she said No! You'll miss school. The trees in mama's garden must be full of ripe fruits now. I won't go to school any more, not even if Bai beats me. Let Govind go alone! When it's time for school he comes and calls me, doesn't go with anyone else even though the boys tease him so much!

When her dress dried a bit Suman drew it on. She could see their courtyard and kitchen from where she sat and all the noises in the vaddo carried easily to her ears. She began to feel drowsy by and by and lay back in the hay.

.....the water in the stream glistens in the sunlight., She falls in and is carried along by the current, far far away. Trees, hills and fields rush past on either side. The stream empties into the Kali river and waves wash over her head. She clings to the branch of a kandla bush but she cannot pull herself out of the water. Then suddenly Govind appears. He braces his foot on a boulder and offers her his hand...

Suman woke up to see that she was still lying in the hay. Someone was on the other side of the haystack ...she craned her neck and saw that it was Bai gathering a fresh bundle for the cows. Manjul took the hay to the shed and talked to the cows for a while. Then she went into the house.

The cow shed stood on the edge of the vaddo in the shade of the big mango tree. The cool shade, the smell of the oxen—Suman loved all this. And Chandu the ox was such a mild creature, he wouldn't move his head even

when she ran across to the shed and perched on the cross bar that kept the animals within. She had a clear view both of the house and of Bai who was busy with her chores. School must have given over by now..Govind will be home soon ...then ...Bai will not leave me today. And when Appa gets to know...

Soon Govind appeared with his bag slung on his shoulder.

"Manjul tai. Where's Suman?"

"She went with you. Why are you asking me then?"

"But she fell into the stream on the way..."

"What!"

"... And then she came home."

"God! Where is she then..!"

Manjul began to wail aloud calling out her name.

"Bayul! O Bayul ... Where are you ?"

"She's lost her books, tai."

"What! How many times have I told her not to dance on that bridge! Bayul ...O Bayul!"

None of the men were in the vaddo at that time. Some had gone to the shops, others were still in the fields or had gone up into the woods. The women gathered in the courtyard, what a commotion they all made! Manjul was crying loudly as she called out to her and Suman didn't like this at all. She got up and crept along the hedge to the back of the house.

"But here she is !" someone yelled.

Manjul was beside herself with rage. Grabbing the broom stick that lay in the yard she rushed towards Suman.

"Where have you been all this while, you wretched creature! Keep telling you to cross the stream slowly but do you listen!"

Someone grabbed the broom stick and tossed it aside.

"Be thankful nothing happened ...she's all right" the woman said as Suman was sent for a bath and everyone dispersed.

Suman began to protest when the topic of her going to school was raised. Days passed. Her new books did not arrive. Finally the idea of sending her was dropped. The only girl in the vaddo who was going to school stopped going but no one even noticed. Everyone was totally immersed in getting news about the Chinese war.

There were nine members from this same extended family out there at the front and bad news kept trickling in day after day. A pall of gloom hung over the vaddo. Sadanand's mother was confined to bed with worry for her only son who'd rushed off to the army paying no heed to her protest. People tried to bolster her spirits, someone or the other kept her company at nights.

A thorn had got embedded in Ganesh's foot yesterday when he'd gone to the jungle. He'd drawn it out but the foot was still sore and when he bumped it against a stone it began to swell up and he was forced to hobble around. Hari, from the upper vaddo, was gathering leaves on the hill slopes.

"What's got into you, hobbling like this and in the jungle, too!" he exclaimed.

"I'm sick of sitting in the house. It's better out here" Ganesh said.

Hari looked at Ganesh closely, what a wreck he had become! His face and shoulders were burnt by the sun, his eyes dull and lifeless. His long, broad bones were all that remained, the flesh on them had long since worn away.

Ganesh had played the role of Hiranyakashyap's lieutenant in a play in the temple many years ago, how well he had danced that day! That was the year the Spirit of Narshinv had taken possession of the actor who played Narshinv's role and he had almost killed Hiranyakashyap on stage! It had taken ten or twelve men to control him, that too after they broke a coconut at his feet to show their respect.

"Go to the barber and get shaved once a week at least" he said to Ganesh offering him a beedi and setting it alight.

"Hari, I want to get my elder one married. See if you know any good boy ..." Ganesh said passing a hand over his sunken, stubble covered cheeks.

"She's young still ..."

"What, young! Nine years old when her mother died. And it's been nine years since."

"What about the younger one then?"

"That's why I waited two years. But now she can look after herself. As for me I can't bear to sit and cook! I'll work in a stone quarry but not in the kitchen ... So see if you can think of a good boy. Doesn't have to be rich. Her mother has left some gold..."

Hari said he'd look around and turned back to gathering leaves. Ganesh hobbled away and Hari was tempted to call out to him again telling him not to go up the hill with his sore foot.

Keshav was passing by the courtyard when Ganesh called out to him. He wasn't the sort to call out to anyone, he generally didn't speak even when someone passed close by, but these days his tongue seemed to have loosened suddenly, what was the matter with him!

"Finished ploughing the land by the lake?"

"Yes. Had become hard. Such big clods kept turning up ... The oxen's backs are swollen. But why did you call?"

"Should have fixed it up with that youngster from Bhaire, he was in the Police force at Sirsi, but then the younger one was very little. And then this flood! So nothing got done..."

"Are you talking about Manjul?"

"Yes. Must get her married this year."

Manjul, who was standing by the porch rushed into the house. What was wrong with Appa, keeps telling everyone the same thing!

"Keshav, if you can think of a good boy...he must be good though."

"I'm not very keen ...But if he's good...these last couple of years since Goa became free, many youngsters have got jobs there. See if you can think of anyone."

"I'll look around."

"She'll get what's in her fate, but we still have to look. We must be sure ...what happens later can't be helped."

"Yes. You know that Vithoba of Khargey ...? What a pretty daughter he had, got her married to this fellow from Baad who was working in Mumbai. He came all suited and booted to see the girl and they were impressed. Said he was a supervisor in some big Mumbai company. They didn't ask around, didn't check the family ...nothing. That fellow took the girl to Mumbai to some slum with an open sewer in front ..."

"Didn't he have a good job?"

"A job! Does something in a small company ...and then he drinks! Took off his wedding head dress and went and got drunk! The father gave some ten or twelve tolas of gold to the girl, he sold all that, she doesn't have a thing left. Vithoba went to visit his daughter recently, now he sits and cries!"

Ganesh was filled with apprehension. "This gentle deer like girl of mine, let her not get something like this" he prayed.

"Poor motherless girl. Tough childhood she's had, at least let her be happy in her husband's house" Keshav remarked.

"This love of drink can ruin a man! Please god, not that!"

Three young men from this vaddo were at the front during the Chinese war of '62 but they all came back safe and sound. During the war with Pakistan in '65 however one young man died on the battle front. That was Soyru's son, Shobha's husband Shanker. He'd come home on leave only once for two months, after they were married. A letter

arrived saying he was going to the front. Then there was no more news.

Suddenly a telegram arrived 'Shanker Gaonkar ill'. Two days later another arrived 'Shanker Gaonkar worse.'

Everyone was worried. The family cried and wailed aloud and as for Shobha..! People waited apprehensively for the third telegram. Ram dada, Govind ajjo and the others who were in the army in the past spoke in hushed tones. When someone dies in the army they don't give the bad news all of a sudden. They send telegrams like this, day after day ...People milled about in their courtyards, by their back doors and in the narrow lanes waiting for some word. Please god, don't let another telegram arrive ....

But sure enough, it did. The telegraph peon left his cycle on the main road and cut through the fields towards the vaddo. Jairam master signed the receipt. 'Shanker Gaonkar dead, wounded in action' it said. The thought of Shobha's ever smiling face and her child like innocence filled everyone's eyes with tears.

A pall of gloom hung over the whole place, it was as though the vaddo had been pushed into a bottomless pit of sorrow. Things remained like this for a whole month. Manjul kept feeling that Shobha would suddenly land at her door and demand something to eat. She felt scared to even pass by her house, these days.

One day Mukund sent a message asking Ganesh to meet him. There was a young man in Hulgey who, after failing in the Metric examination, had joined the army.

"Big two storeyed house. Plantains, mangoes, coconut and jackfruit trees in the garden and seven khannis of land under paddy" Mukund said.

"But he's in the army..."

"The army is different now Ganesh,. They're paid well. Can even take their wives and children with them."

"War is bad ...look at Soyru's son ...what a nice boy!"

"That's what I wanted to talk about ...look, this boy is educated, he won't be sent to the front. He's in Supplies, that means he takes food and other things to the soldiers."

"Is he good?"

"Fit for Manjul. Thin, fair, good looking. Doesn't get dragged into anything. I've seen him since he was a child. His father Mhalu is my cousin. I was passing by the other day and he said he was looking for a good girl for his son."

"Mhalu of Hulgey? I've heard of him."

"Look Mhalu is a peculiar sort...flies into a rage for no reason. But half his life is over, how much time does he have left? If she can keep him happy, the daughter -in-law wili rule the house.

"I'm still worried.. the army..."

"Look, do what you like Ganesh. I just pointed him out to you ..now you decide."

Ganesh was filled with conflicting emotions, Mukund had shown him this match, what was the harm in going there and finding out some more details? He took out a dhoti and a clean shirt from the trunk.

"Where are you going Appa?"

"To Hulgey. Got some work" he smiled.

Manjul was pleased. Appa had shaved and put on fresh clothes. He was smiling like he used to before!

Ganesh walked towards Hulgey trying to guess roughly where Mhalu's house could be. He asked some men who merely pointed down the road. Strange men, can't even give directions to a wayfarer, he thought.

The house was just a little away from the river and the air as well as the ground beneath was cool and damp. Ganesh walked in through the gate into the cool shadows of the garden which was overgrown with shrubs. Hard working man, this Mhalu? He thought. There were two huge trees by the gate, a thorny kavanji tree that had shed all its leaves and a huge pangar laden with red flowers. What had he kept these trees by the house for, Ganesh thought.

The month of Magh was almost over but the courtyard was still such a mess. It was filled with leaves and other rubbish and the tulsi pedestal was broken too. No one had smeared a layer of mud and dung all over the courtyard and the tulsi pedestal as yet. This house has no women in it, only when a woman lives here will it begin to look like a home, Ganesh thought.

"Is anyone home?' he called out at the door. But there was no reply. Such a big house, my voice must be lost inside it, he thought, and called out again.

An old man emerged with a coconut husk in his hand. He wore a dirty Kashti tucked into the thick silver chain about his waist and the upper part of his body was bare. Though he was obviously a farmer exposed to the sun and the rain his fair skin was not tanned, it had taken on a reddish hue instead.

"Where are you from?" he asked.

"I'm Ganesh. From the lower vaddo of Shiddar village. Mukund bhavoji said you had a son of marriageable age."

"And the girl?"

"My daughter."

"Come."

He took Ganesh into the hall and made him sit on an armchair covered with some animal skin, He offered a dish with some jaggery and a tumbler of water. Why is this jaggery so tinged with salt...must be something to do with the soil on which the cane was grown, Ganesh thought.

"Growing sugarcane?"

"I did. Last year. Two small patches of land. Not this time. Can't manage all the work in the fields by myself."

"These old tiled houses, so strong they are. Where can you get such wood work today!" Ganesh exclaimed admiringly.

"Yes. All stone walls. And good quality wood. Not a piece of ordinary wood has been used here."

Ganesh pretended to admire the woodwork and roamed about the hall taking a good look around. A huge bed of

polished black wood stood in the hall and there was a large store room in a corner. Who knows if that is empty or if there is anything inside, he wondered. He could see stacks of mudos piled one upon the other in an inner room. He noticed the two young coconut palms laden with fruit that cast a cool shadow just outside the door. Filled with enthusiasm he came back and sat down.

"Will you get your son married this year?" he asked.

Mhalu remained silent for a while as though he was inviting speculation before he showed his hand.

"I might. If we get a good girl."

"Don't have any doubts about that ...she's clever. And very affectionate, my daughter..."

"Must be strong. Hard working."

"She'll manage everything very well. I haven't made her work in the fields but if she has to she'll work like a tiger. She's managed everything since her mother died."

Ganesh wanted to say much more but he sensed that the old man was acting quite aloof.

"My son's done his Matric. And he's not a lowly soldier in the army, he has to write and keep accounts. One son. All that you see here will be his. The daughter-in-law will have to take care of all this."

"Yes. Of course!"

"Uttam's son Devidas got married last year. Studied up to the seventh or eighth class and joined the Armed Police in Goa. They don't own even a khanni of land and have only a tiny garden. Yet he got thirteen tolas of gold! And they bore the expenses of the whole wedding. Know what he looks like? Dark ...nothing compared to my son!"

"We'll look after your prestige and all the honour that is due to you ...her mother has left a little gold, too."

"What I'm saying doesn't relate to you ...this is just the custom in this village. We haven't decided about the marriage yet..?

"When will your son come?"

"He'll come. In a month or so."

"Send him to see the girl, then."

"Let's see what he says."

"I won't look anywhere else then..?"

"I don't want to tie you up."

"I'll wait. Till your son comes at least. You can ask anyone in the village about my daughter. She's a very good girl."

"I'll take Mukund's word for that."

As Ganesh stepped down into the courtyard his eyes fell on the broken tulsi pedestal once again. Bai will set all this right in no time at all. Must tell her to get those two trees cut down... Mhalu was still standing by the door. His flesh hung loosely from his short thick bones. I went there to talk about his son's marriage yet he didn't think it necessary to draw a shirt over his bare body, Ganesh mused.

By the time he crossed the river and got back home the sun was beating down mercilessly and he was exhausted.

"Get me some rice water Bai, I'll bathe later" he said. He drank the rice water without stopping for breath and when he felt better he began to smile.

"Appa, where did you go?"

"Two storeyed house, they have, but there's nothing homely about it. No woman around, yet those palms are laden with nuts. Imagine what will happen when arms tinkling with bangles tend to them! But you must have that Kavanji tree and that Pangar by the gate cut down immediately after the marriage, Bai."

Manjul was overcome with shyness and rushed indoors.

They dug a well in the middle of the field and planted a small patch with spinach, brinjal, varieties of gourd and chillies and erected a little trellis for a water melon creeper. Manjul would finish her household chores quickly and rush to the vegetable patch to water the plants and spread

fertilizer and mud till the sun rose high up in the sky.

She normally didn't bring Bayul with her for that high spirited creature often danced about trampling the young plants under foot. If she were given a pot of water to sprinkle on the plants she'd pour it out in a rush and the saplings would sink into the mud. Then Manjul would scold her. In any case she was always scolding her for something or the other these days, Manjul was absolutely fed up of her wayward ways.

When Appa got back from the jungle or when he finished ploughing the field he'd head for the vegetable patch too. Then Manjul would draw water and appa would sprinkle it on the plants. Eight or ten konkan doodhis had formed on the plant and the snake gourds swinging from the trellis almost touched the ground. Clusters of red and green chillies could be seen and the water melon creeper had strayed all over the patch with some ten or twenty melons nestling amongst the leaves.

"I'm thirsty Bai. Let's eat a melon."

"What about Bayul?"

"We'll take a piece for her."

Appa took the curved knife that hung from his waist and selected a ripe water melon. He carried it to the well and was just beginning to slice it when he noticed some movement just beyond the plants.

"Who are you? Where are you going?" he asked the two youths who were passing by.

"We're from Hulgey...just passing by ..."

"Come have a piece then..." Ganesh offered the fruit to the young men and glanced at them closely. One man was dark and tall and wore short pants. The other, dressed in a clean shirt and trousers, wore shoes on his feet and the strong smell of his hair oil hung heavy in the air.

Ganesh felt a vague sense of anticipation as he sliced the fruit and called Manjul to his side. The flesh of the melon was a bright crimson and the slices seemed to be

oozing blood. Manjul wondered why the young stranger was staring at her, so.

"We're going to the lower vaddo to Ganesh's house. To see a girl.

This is my nephew, my sister's son."

The piece of melon Manjul had bitten off seemed to stick in her mouth and the crimson juice trickled down her chin. She wiped her mouth on her sleeve wishing she could run far away.

"I'm Ganesh. And this is my daughter Manjul, the one you've come to see."

A tremor of disbelief, tinged with embarrassment and joy passed through all of them. The young man began to smile, The man in short pants lowered himself on the grass beside Ganesh.

"Mama, don't you recognize me? I'm Raghoba's son Narayan, from Kinnar village. Five or six years ago you bought a bull from us, I was the one who untied it for you..."

Ganesh looked at him closely.

"Yes...now I remember! That was a good bull. Worked hard. It's still there in our shed." Both began to laugh loudly.

Narayan spoke as though they had known each other for years. He seemed wise, one who had seen much of life.

"What does it matter whether we meet here or in your house? Now look here Sridhar, take a good look at the girl. Don't say later that she was covered in snow and powder and you were fooled by her looks!"

Manjul was not fair, her skin was of a dark, coppery hue. At this moment, however, her cheeks were red and the colour seemed to spread all over her face. Slim and delicately built she was active and moved quickly about, it was her long thick hair, however, that gave her such a distinctive look.

The young man was also slim and delicate and it was difficult to believe that he was in the army. He was very

fair and there was a suspicious ruddiness about his mouth and nose.

His eyes were grey but they were not bright and sparkling so his fair complexion somehow seemed dull and sallow.

"Bai, you go home. We'll follow, soon."

Manjul lifted the basket on to her head and set off as Ganesh tried to keep the two men engaged in conversation for a while.

Govind and Suman were playing in the courtyard and about the house when Manjul got home. She gave them the slices of watermelon and began setting the house in order.

"Bai my slice fell into the dust..." Suman came up to her, crying.

"What a restless creature you are" ! God knows what will happen to you tomorrow!" Manjul exclaimed.

She went to Sumitra mavshi's house. "They're coming to see me" she whispered in her ear.

In a matter of minutes the news spread all over the vaddo. Sumitra mavshi and a couple of others came into the kitchen. The other women hung about their doorways and windows or bustled about in their courtyards excitedly, they're coming to see Manjul, they whispered.

By this time Ganesh and the two others had reached the gate. The young man took off his shoes and sat down on the new reed mat. He looked like a prince in his bright red socks, white trousers and light blue shirt, all those who peered at him from every corner seemed to think.

"Good! He'll match Manjul very well."

"The child has suffered since childhood. She deserves to be happy now," they all said.

"Do you want to see the girl again?" Ganesh asked.

"No..no...we saw her in the garden..."

"Let's see her all dressed up mama..." the boy's uncle said, so Ganesh went inside and spoke to the women.

Sumitra was a pretty, well-dressed woman and she

loved dressing others up too. She had dressed Manjul so prettily that if the girl had suddenly walked around the vaddo people would have wondered who this stylish young woman was and whether she had just arrived from Mumbai!

Someone had brought four plantains and a packet of biscuits which were laid out on a plate. Manjul placed the tea cups and the plate of food before the guests and hurried inside but Sumitra led her out again.

"Why do you run away? Come, stand here. Let's see who can find any fault with you" she said smiling at the young man, but Manjul wriggled free.

"Well? Did you like the girl?" the uncle whispered into the young man's ear.

He nodded. Then he said in soft tones,

"Mama...tell them I want a gold chain of one and a half tolas..."

"We'll talk about the dowry later. You decide about the girl first..."

Ganesh heard all this as he stood by the middle room. He'd already been thrown into a turmoil when the father mentioned the thirteen tolas..and now the son had brought up this! But he didn't want to lose this alliance...

"He likes the girl. Now the elders must decide about the dowry and the arrangements," the uncle said as they prepared to leave. Ganesh escorted them to the river bank but on the way they spoke only about the Great Flood, not another word was said.

"Ganesh dada, if we'd known earlier we could have arranged for a couple of chairs..." Narshinv said when Ganesh got back.

"Never mind. By the grace of Lord Mallikarjun, they liked the girl."

Manjul had changed back into her soiled skirt and blouse and was blowing into the fire at the hearth. Ganesh cleared his throat and she turned around.

"Did you like him?"

Manjul remained silent.

"Got land. And a house. And the boy is good, too."

"But I had no mother here...and there's no mother there too, appa!"

Ganesh was taken aback. "There are some things which are not in our fate, my child" he said as he went out into the hall and sat there leaning against the wall.

Suman was skipping about on the new reed mat, spreading it out and then rolling it up again.

"Put that away at once!" he screamed at the girl. "Grown as big as a horse but not a grain of sense!"

It was three months since Shobha's husband Shanker had died and Manjul felt very sorry for her. She'd go to meet her sometimes and then she'd come back home and cry. Shobha's father and elder brother had come three or four times to take her with them, as was the norm, but the young girl refused to set foot outside the house. Only my dead body shall leave this house now, she said, and all those who heard her were shocked at her words.

Her husband had died far away at the front and nobody knew how he had been cremated so Shobha was taken to Gokarn temple where his last rites were performed and the symbols of her marriage were removed. She was then taken to her parent's house to stay the night, as was the custom, and her family decided that they would not send her back.

Shobha picked up her little bundle, "take me home. Or I'll go by myself" she said. Finally her elder brother took her to her husband's place but no one had visited her after that.

One day shobha slipped into Manjul's kitchen just as dusk was falling, her bare unadorned face heavy with sorrow and embarrassment. Manjul looked at the slip of a girl who had just crossed her eighteenth year and thought, she's just like me...she could easily pass as a young

unmarried girl, one whose marriage is being fixed ...if I had a cousin old enough I'd have asked him to marry shobha and how I'd have rejoiced at their wedding!

Suddenly Shobha's eyes filled with tears and she snivelled like a little child.

"Vaini, you're not eating at all, these days."

"Who told you that?"

"Your mother-in-law, Parvati mavshi."

"If I starve maybe I'll die quickly." Then after a pause she said, "Manjul, sometimes people are reported missing in the war and then after six months or a year they come back ...is that true?"

Manjul's eyes filled with tears and she looked away.

"He made me so happy when he was here the last time, would take me in his arms and dance around ... yesterday his pension papers arrived. And some papers about his money..I just signed them blindly and gave them to my father-in-law."

"Vaini, don't do something foolish like that. They'll trick you. You have your whole life ahead..."

"My whole life!" Shobha laughed bitterly. "I don't want anything any more, Manjul, not a thing!"

It had got quite dark by then and Manjul was getting up to light a lamp when Shobha forced her to sit down again. They sat in silence for a while, then Manjul said in hesitant tones, "He came to see me the other day. He liked me."

"That's what I came to ask, but..."

"He's in the army. Like Shanker bhau."

"Each one gets what is in his or her fate...but did you like him?"

Manjul remained silent.

"Don't worry then. If one is lucky one can come out of fire unscathed. Now I must go ...it's late..." and Shobha vanished into the dark.

"Vaini don't be silly...show some interest in Shanker bhau's money matters..." Manjul called out after her. In

just three months Shobha had suddenly become old and wizened, she had begun to talk like an old woman, Manjul thought.

Suman was so carried away by the excitement in the house that she was always dancing about and getting scolded by someone or the other. If she were asked to do something she'd rush through the job and mess it all up and get into trouble all over again. One day, when she unfolded the wedding sari and sat there sniffing its new scent Manjul flew into a rage.

Their mama had brought his two young daughters along, they were younger than Suman and the three of them were always playing games. Govind, too, played with them. Everyone who saw her said 'wonder what will happen to this girl! And Ganesh can't bear to have her in his sight!'

The musicians began to play on the wedding day and Suman was totally confused. Bai, who had been working without rest all these days was sitting quietly in the kitchen. Sometimes she'd burst into tears. There were so many women and young girls bustling about her, they held her protectively as they brought her out for the haldi muhurth. When that was over and she was escorted back again Suman felt that somehow Bai had changed.,

The musicians began to play again and Suman felt deeply disturbed. Why were these women bustling about her, so? Bai had told her about Aai's death many many times ...about the crowds of people in the court yard, how everyone was crying ...the flowers in the hair, paan and supari ...all she had to do was to say Bai, did you see Aai? And Bai would tell so many stories about their mother ... but I didn't see Aai, ever.

So many people had gathered in the court yard, even Soyru dada who kept fighting with everyone, was there. Suman was scared of him. And that Nilu ajjo with his

huge moustache, how dark he was! He'd caught her plucking mangoes in his garden, once! Why hadn't Govind come back yet? His uncle had bought him a new shirt and pants and he'd gone to change into them.

Suddenly there was a loud burst of fire works and the music started all over again. Suman was scared so she came inside. Bai drew her into her arms and began to cry but Suman just stared at her face, there were no tears in her eyes. Suman went back into the matov that had been erected in the courtyard and sat down on a bench. The shrill screeching of horns and the wailing of musical instruments set the whole atmosphere trembling all of a sudden, 'the boat has touched the bank, the bridegroom has arrived' someone announced.

Suman rushed to the gate. She could see a group of some two hundred people tramping along the edge of the field. They were accompanied by musicians and were raising a huge cloud of dust. They were advancing vigorously and in the shimmering light of the morning they all seemed to be dressed in white....so many rapidly advancing feet!

These people are coming to take Bai away....the thought suddenly struck Suman and she came back to the bench in silence. A lot of children were scampering about the matov, Govind too, but Suman just sat there as though in a huff. They brought Bai out, garlands were exchanged and plantains and lumps of crystallized sugar were distributed. Suman quietly ate what she was given not bothering to respond to the taunts of the other children.

Govind came to look for her and she was asked to sit on the wedding platform next to her sister. Suman wound an arm tightly around Bai but she did not say a word.

"This one is your sister-in-law" someone said to the bridegroom who merely bent his head and continued to smile. Suman didn't like this man with his red lips. He should have been dark, like Bai, she thought.

The wedding rituals were followed by the feast and

then it was time for the couple to depart. Bai clung to Appa sobbing loudly as the women of the vaddo tried to console her. She was looking around ..she's looking for me, Suman thought as she watched from a distance.

"There....your Bai is going now...." Ambika mavshi said and suddenly Suman began to sob. She rushed forward throwing her arms around her sister, refusing to let go. They tried to reason with her but her sobs only grew louder. Finally someone lifted her up and carried her into the matov. She sat there on the stairs and cried her heart out like a little child does when its mother fails to come home at dusk. Finally she grew drowsy and Sumitra mavshi took her by the hand and put her to sleep.

Suman changed dramatically after Bai went away to her husband's house. It was as though someone had taken away the spring in her foot steps, the ceaseless chatter from her lips. There was no place to hide, for who would seek her now?

When Bai came back to her parental home for the various rituals conducted after the marriage she said, "Bayul, take one measure of rice for the mid morning gruel, one and a half measures for lunch. Just one measure will do for dinner. Call Appa or one of the mavshis to take the pot off the fire. Don't try that yourself. And stand back at the well. You must judge from the sound and from the weight if the pot is filled, don't lean into the well to look!"

Bai used to say the same things all these years but Suman never paid any attention. This time, however, every word she uttered registered in her mind and if anyone said anything to the contrary she was quick to retort No !Bai said this...or Bai said to do that! When she sat down to grind the paste for the humman she would recite aloud 'Bai said take fifteen chillies, four dried cocum bits, half a fist full of coriander and half a coconut. Never put onion in bangda curry, Bai said, always add a dash of triphal!.

Bai visited them at least five or six times during the first month of her married life. How happy she is, keeps saying something or the other and giggles to herself! How pretty she looks, too. I love the smell of her new clothes, I love to play with the chain around her neck.

The last time they came Bhaṽoji ḅrought a fish that had just been caught in the river. Bai said a big Shet from Hulgey was bargaining for the fish but Bhavoji paid more than him. He brought me a sweet smelling cake of soap, face powder and cloth material for a dress. Bai says he spends a lot.

She looks at him, smiles and acts shy. She takes his clothes and sets them in the bathroom and rubs oil on his head. How much water he threw on me when they were playing those games after the wedding! And he made a garland of coconut shells and put it around my neck. Now he teases me and makes fun of my name. I'm beginning to like him, too!

One night Suman was lying beside Manjul savouring the smell of her soap and the new clothes she wore. Bhavoji was sleeping at the other end of the hall. Manjul had made his bed with a new mat, a quilt and a flowered bed sheet which she had always hidden at the bottom of the trunk. She kept a shining brass tumbler of water by his pillow—this was the only tumbler in the house that glistened like gold the more you rubbed it. The Night Queen shrubs which had survived the Great Flood were laden with flowers this year and their mild perfume filled the night air as the cool breeze from the river set the coconut fronds rustling around the house.

Suman fell asleep and Manjul carefully removed her arm from across her body and put out the light. After quite a while when Suman woke up suddenly she realized that Bai was not there beside her, now where could she have gone? She wanted to call out to her but the thought that Bhavoji was asleep at the other end of the hall made her hold her tongue. Who could have carried Bai away...and why was there no sound from appa who was sleeping in

the kitchen, Suman was scared. There was only the mild perfume of the Night Queen and the rustle of the wind amongst the palm fronds.

Suddenly she heard a soft rustle like the wind passing through the pipal leaves..was that someone whispering or was it a giggle? Then she heard Bai groan...she heard her bangles tinkle...Suman's eyes tried to pierce the darkness but she couldn't see a thing. Now why had Bai gone there in the middle of the night?

Bhavoji treated her well. He brought flowers for her, smiled at her often and once Suman had seen him caress Bai's cheek. Maybe that's why she's gone there...what will he do? Take her in his arms? How childish these two act! Bai acts so wise with me and see how silly she is with him! Suman kept staring into the darkness but she could see nothing... there was only that soft rustling sound, the tinkling bangles and the soft whispers....

Suman didn't fall asleep again. After quite a while Bai returned and what a strange assortment of smells she brought... the scent of new clothes, the perfume of the Night Queen...the strange smell of sweat that had poured out of every pore...and the secret smells of Bai's woman-hood...Suman snuggled close to her letting the assorted smells wash over her.

When Manjul departed the next day she wore all the jewelry appa had given her, two bracelets, two bangles and the necklace of twelve gold sovereigns that hung down to her navel. Ganesh had not bothered to weigh any of this, he had just given everything his wife had left behind to Manjul.

—Appa escorted the couple to the river bank as Suman returned home.

"Ganesh bab has given all his wife's gold to Manjul, he's kept nothing for the younger one, poor thing" she heard Gokul mavshi say to Sumitra.

Now why did these people have to worry about all that? See how pretty Bai looks in all that gold!

When Manjul reached her husband's house after the wedding she was surprised to see that there was no sign of festivity in the house, there were no toranas or decorations, no air of celebration. Someone had sprinkled water in the courtyard to keep the dust down and a small canopy of palm fronds had been erected overhead. The few people milling about seemed disinterested and when she stepped over the threshold it took them quite some time to locate five married women who could carry out the rituals of welcoming the new bride.

Once the rituals were over everyone was gone. They had only cooked a pot full of rice and some sweet semolina but even that was left over. Only five people stayed over the night, two aged aunts and three of his friends one of whom was his cousin.

Quite a lot of food was wasted that night and Manjul felt that it ought to be served to some poor people, perhaps those of a lower caste. This was how it always happened at Shiddar, the last set of people who ate the festive meal were always from the poor, from amongst the lower castes. But everything was different here. Half the food was left over, it went bad and was thrown away.

Her father-in-law bustled in and out patting the thick metal key that hung from the chain around his waist. He wore only a thin cloth around his waist and his body was bare. If some one wanted some provisions the old man would think for a moment, then he'd draw out the key to the store and unlock the door. He'd slip into the darkness and bring the objects out. If they asked for three coconuts he'd only bring two. 'That's enough, it'll do he'd say!

When it was time for the naming ceremony and the couple were seated on a reed mat in the kitchen Sridhar was mulling over names like Nirmal and Shaila, trying to decide what it would be.

"Call her Kaveri. That was your grand mother's name",

his father said all of a sudden. Sridhar was upset. But he silently wrote 'Kaveri' in the rice in the platter. Manjul didn't like that name at all.

There was a quarrel among between the people who lived in the neighbouring houses that night. It continued till well over midnight and Manjul lay there scared, wondering if they would also be dragged into the fight. As it is, her father-in-law was adding to the commotion cursing one party, siding with another. Sridhar kept wandering in and out of the house, he was her only solace at that time.

When Manjul awoke early the next morning her father-in-law was lighting a fire in the hearth.

"I'll do that..." she offered and the old man silently moved away. He came back with some rice and a saucer bearing sugar and tea leaves.

"The rice is for the mid-morning gruel. Make some tea now" he said.

Manjul cast an eye about the kitchen and saw only a few mud vessels, there was not a tin or jar in sight. Does this man really keep all the provisions locked up everyday, she wondered.

Outside, the old man was complaining loudly to his son. "That Shanker! He's pushed the boundary fence deep into our land...we must uproot it! I won't let him get away, I'll drag him to the High Court!" he raved.

The house was huge, with an upper floor made up of wooden beams - a feature that Manjul found very strange. But the bare stone walls, the massive beams and all that heavy wood work seemed to press down on Manjul making her nervous, she kept feeling that one of those heavy beams would break free and crash down on her head.

Everything seemed incomplete. The walls were bare of plaster, the floor was pitted and uneven and the windows were mere holes without shutters. It was as though someone had meant to construct a beautiful house but some disaster had struck mid-way and the structure was left incomplete.

Appa's house in Shiddar was better than this, she thought, with its two rooms side by side and the kitchen a short distance away. The kitchen was a general meeting place. Any one in the vaddo could amble in to gossip for a while. But this house that was always shut seemed like some barren spot that yearned for the smell of Man. All the rooms had that same musty smell and Manjul felt that her father-in-law lurked in the shadows. In her imagination she saw him running his fingers along the wall as though he was looking for something.

Manjul didn't feel free in that house for a very long time. Whenever the old man drew out his key and the door to the store house creaked open Manjul's hair stood on end. The only source of comfort was her husband and whenever he was at home she had a powerful desire to be close to him, to let his scent fill her nostrils. But the form of her father-in-law loomed so large in that house that all her desires wilted in its shade, she remained shackled by fear, and a sense of decorum.

Everyone had advised her at the wedding that her father-in-law was an old man who had lived out most of his life, there was no one else in the house and she would have to look after him. On entering the house, however, she realized that everything was tightly controlled by the old man. What can I possibly do for him, she thought, he seems capable of picking me up and striding across the hillocks, so full of energy is he! He will, no doubt, be laid low by age some day but until then he will continue to run the show.

On the day of the wedding she had noticed a thin woman bustling about the house. When there was no work to do the woman just sat in a corner in silence. She seemed quite poor and her thin frame was almost hidden in the nine yard sari she wore.

Someone said to Manjul,

"This is your sister-in-law ... Your husband's sister."

And sure enough she was fair and grey like her

brother, but why did she behave like an outsider, like a stranger in her own home?

The day after the wedding when she was ready to depart the woman clasped Manjul in her arms and began to cry.

"Don't shun me my dear ...don't keep me away from this house..." she sobbed.

Manjul looked around hesitantly, "Why don't you stay for a couple of days, Vaini, why are you leaving so soon?" she asked.

The woman, however, picked up her bag and set off, wiping her streaming eyes with the end of her sari. Manjul's husband and father-in-law were in the house at the time but neither of them came out to say good bye. Why was this so? And where was her husband ... What sort of misfortune had crushed her so? Manjul learnt the whole story in a matter of days as the women from the neighbouring houses provided the colourful details.

Sumati had fallen in love with a boy from the village when she was barely fifteen or sixteen years of age. The two would roam about the forest and the hillocks together and lie clasped in each other's arms. The villagers regarded them as innocent children, how were they to know that the two were bound by such deep and abiding ties that they were willing to die for each other, that their love ran as deep as the roots of a sapling that grows in some fertile spot.

One day the girl's marriage was arranged with a sepoy in the customs department at Bhatkal. Disaster loomed on all sides and in the midst was this frightened couple, their hearts awash with love for each other but not a word escaped their lips.

The girl, Sumati, got married and went away with her husband. The boy roamed about the hills and forests like a mad man, not saying a word to any one for days on end. He'd loiter by the temple or on the platform beneath the pipal and one such evening, six months later, Sumati stood before him.

"Sumati! What are you doing here so late?"

"I've run away. Took a bus from Bhatkal to Karwar. Then I walked to Kodibag and took the evening boat."

"Alone?"

"Yes."

"Weren't you scared?"

Sumati remained silent. Sadanand was amazed. This girl, who had never set foot outside Hulgey, who had gone to Bhatkal for the first time in her life, had managed to come back alone! Bhau had told him that it took a whole day to cover that distance!

Sumati was hot and tired and worn out with hunger and the nine yards sari that she wore trailed on the ground. They went to the pond by the temple and slaked their thirst.

"Where will you go now, Sumati?"

"Bappa will kill me when he gets to know."

Sumati was too drowsy to sit there any longer so Sadanand led her to the area behind the sanctum. She lay down on the cemented floor with the end of her sari bunched beneath her head and soon she was asleep. Sada, however, leant against the wall quite beside himself with fright. Her father will kill her, certainly, he thought. And Anna and Bhau will not let me live, either.

He woke her up long before daybreak and having filled their stomachs with water from the pond the two frightened youngsters climbed the hillock and hid there amongst the bushes. They stayed there for three whole days. At night when the wolves began to prowl on the hillocks and everyone in the village fell asleep they went down to the temple pond and drank their fill. They slept behind the sanctum and before the break of dawn they were back on the hill.

"Sada, I can't bear this any longer. Do something. Let's go to your mavshi's house."

"All right. We'll go. Tonight."

That afternoon someone came up the hill slope calling

out to the cows that were grazing there. "Sumati, someone is coming this side. Get up. Let's hide." "No Sada ... let's not hide any more." Sumati was too tired to get up and hide and in a matter of moments the man was upon them. It was Raghunath, who lived by the atmi grove.

"Arrey! You're hiding here! And the whole village is looking for you. Yesterday her husband came and created such a commotion ... Wait ...just wait ..!" and he scrambled down the hill.

The two youngsters sat there in silence, there was nothing left for them to do. They didn't want to get up and hide all over again. Sumati threw herself into Sada's arms and began to sob. It was over an hour before they heard some men climbing up the hill. Sumati's father was there, so were Sada's father and his two elder brothers.

When the group of men came up to them the two cowered like a pair of frightened chickens. Hunger, fear and worry had reduced them to such dire straits that they seemed like a pair of wild creatures that lived in the woods. No one spoke for a long moment then Sumati's father roared in tones that seemed to shake the hills.

"This impure creature has brought shame to our clan! I won't see her face again. I'll go home and bathe in cold water and eat bitter broth .... As far as I am concerned, she is dead!"

Sadanand's brothers advanced menacingly towards them kicking the young man and grabbing the woman by her hair. His father dragged them back.

"Let them die here ...there's no place in my house for this sinner who lies with another man's wife! My son is dead .... And buried on this hill .... If you dare come down to the village we'll cut off your legs ....!" The men turned away and went down the hill.

Everything turned dark before their eyes and their surroundings seemed to have been wiped away. As the sun set that evening sadanand's mavshi came up to them. She had a small waterpot on her hip and a basket with

some rice and fish curry wrapped in a plantain leaf. She stood with her back to them as they gobbled the food and gulped the water ... There was no trace of love or sympathy in her behavior.

"Sada, don't hang about these bushes at night ...come down to my house when it gets dark. And you ...! You've committed such a hideous crime ... You can only give up your life! There's no place in our society or our religion for one like you!"

She picked up the basket and turned away. After walking a few paces she turned around and said " You will come ...Sada ...won't you? Take that one to the cremation ground first ..."

Sada didn't say anything but he didn't go to his aunt's house that night. They went to the temple of Mahadev to sleep. People said that the ghosts and spirits that attended on the Lord roamed about the area at night so no one came that way. They had found a place to shelter themselves but the nights stretched lonely and gloomy and adding to their misery were the pangs of hunger and of thirst.

"Sada, what do we do now ... Your mavshi has turned against me too ..?"

They sat close together trying to draw comfort from each other's presence.

"That's why I didn't go to her house. I won't leave you, sumati!" "I'll jump into that pond ..everything will be all right then ..."

"But I won't let you! You've given up everything for me ... !"

Sumati turned to him and clasped him tightly in her arms. After a while they went to the back of the sanctum and Sumati fell asleep. Sada, however, sat there by her head deeply immersed in thought.

The next morning his aunt came up the hill with some rice bhakris and a brass urn of tea.

"Why didn't you come last night?" she asked.

"Mavshi, Bappa has said I mustn't leave this hillock ..."

"Will you die here along with this wretched shrew, then?"

"Mavshi, get me a sickle, and axe and two mud pots ..."

"Why? Will you cremate this wretch here?"

"There's no place for us amongst our people. I'll build a small hut on the hill slope beside the fishermen's settlement ..."

"And what will you eat?"

"I'll go to the quarry and look for work. I'll carry mud .... I'll leran to cut stone ..."

For the first time a spark of sympathy appeared in his aunt's breast. "The son of such a big farmer ...and you'll cut stone?"

"Mavshi, you'll get me a sickle and an axe, won't you?" Sada called out again as she went down the hill.

"I don't want you to die here like this ..so I will. Build a hut. Or chop off her head!"

This was only the second time that Sumati had come to her father's house since she had run off with Sadanand. Some seven or eight years ago her father had taken very ill and it seemed that he would not survive. She had come up to the door and gazed on him but the stubborn old man, true to his word, had not set eyes on her face.

She had not been invited to her brother's wedding either. She only managed to come because her maternal uncle refused to attend the function without her. She was full of hope that the bitterness was a thing of the past but no one paid any attention to her here. She was not even allowed to perform the rituals that are generally performed by the bridegroom's sister, these were finally performed by Sridhar's cousin.

Manjul was very sorry to hear all this and she would have gladly invited Sumati to spend a week or two with them. But her father-in-law! Who would tackle him? The man had no sympathy for his own daughter's plight!

Manjul narrated her sister-in-law's story to Suman when she went to Shiddar the next time and that little child seemed overwhelmed by the poor woman's tale. She sat in silence as though allowing the sad story to sink deep into her consciousness. Then suddenly she started talking about things totally unrelated to the issue.

"Yesterday a ripe mango was falling from the tree ...I ran to catch it but Govind shoved me aside and began to eat it himself. I was so mad I scratched him hard ..?

"Bayul, such long nails! And you scratched Govind with those ... He'd bleed..!"

"He did."

However, the next day as Manjul got ready to return home she saw Govind up on the mango tree shaking the bough while Suman gathered the fallen fruit in the skirt of her dress.

Bayul came running up to her carefully holding on to the fruit.

"Weren't you fighting with him yesterday?"

"Yes. Today he asked me why I wouldn't talk to him. Then he said he'd get me as many mangoes as I wanted."

Manjul called out to Govind asking him to climb down but the boy remained frozen on the bough trembling with fright. He clutched at one branch after the other, lowered his foot gingerly then drew it up again. Manjul rushed to the tree in alarm

"Can't you climb down?" she asked."

"He was so scared climbing up, too ...clutched the tree tightly all the time ..."

"If you're so scared why did you ever climb up?" Manjul was beside herself with fright but she began to guide him down, pointing out branches that he could step on and others that he could hold. She stood under the tree hoping to break his fall if he happened to slip.

When he finally reached the ground she turned to him in anger, "Why did you climb that tree, why?"

"Suman was not talking to me. I wanted to pluck as

many mangoes as she wanted ..." He said and Manjul was overcome with love for the boy. The two children then accompanied her to the river bank.

Sridhar wrote to his associates that he had got married and would like to bring his wife with him if quarters were available. He asked them to send a railway pass for his wife, too. His leave was almost over and the couple waited eagerly for some word. His unit was posted at Shimla, Manjul had no idea where that was but the prospect of going with her husband made her happy.

One day Sridhar came up to her waving a yellow envelope. He had got permission to take her with him and her railway pass was also enclosed. Manjul was delirious with happiness and as excited as a little child.

"Where is this place, Shimla?"

"You have to travel five days to get there."

"Oh Mother! How will we go?"

"Up to Delhi, for four days by train. Then by bus."

"Four days in the train? Where do we eat? Bathe?"

"In there."

"What is this train?"

"Have you seen the State Transport buses at Karwar? Imagine twenty or twenty five such buses tied one behind the other running on iron tracks ...you get food and water inside ..."

Manjul's head began to spin. She had been out of Shiddar only twice in her life, and both times she had gone to Karwar by boat. The first trip was for Vishnu dada's wedding and the second was when she attended the temple festival in her aunt's village. Bayul was too young to be taken around and ever since Aai died Appa didn't even think of going anywhere.

"Where will you board the train?"

"I used to go to Hubli earlier but now that Goa is free it's easier to go there, Margao is closer."

Manjul was more happy at the thought of visiting Goa than she was about going to Delhi and Simla. She'd heard so many strange tales about Goa, how even old women wore frocks ... about the white skinned soldiers and how they used to rule the land. Suddenly a dark foreboding thought came into her mind.

"Have you spoken to your father?"

"No. But I will. This evening."

Manjul's mind was in a turmoil, what would her father-in-law say? I'll go even if he doesn't give permission. I'll pick up my bag and follow him, she thought. The news soon spread to the neighbouring houses. Parvatiakki, who lived next door, waved from her porch and Manjul smiled and nodded happily to say that they would really be going soon.

Dumb Devappa strode through the hot afternoon sun and came up to their house dripping with sweat. He mopped his face with the towel wrapped around his head and sat down. Sridhar made elaborate signs and gestures as the two of them conversed.

"This is our Devappa mam. See that little tiled house down over there... that's his. Lives there alone. People come from far away to consult him about their animals. He can say what is wrong with a bullock just by watching how it trembles when you slap it soundly on its back!"

Manjul stared at the man. He wore a shirt that came down to his navel and a kashti, one end of which was trailing on the ground. He handed her a big cucumber and his lips moved rapidly as he gestured about as though saying something.

"He's telling you to make tavsoli with that cucumber and to give him some, too. Somebody gave it to him when he went to tend their cows. Says I have got myself a fine wife ...should look after you like a flower..."

Manjul wanted to laugh. She placed a tumbler of water and two moong laddoos that she had brought from her father's house before the man. Having eaten them he

tossed the strip of blanket over his shoulder and set off.

Manjul's father-in-law was working in the garden when Devappa came up to him. He made some deep noises in his throat and her father-in-law responded with loud words and elaborate gestures followed by a string of curses.

"These two behave like this all the time. Scream at each other...curse...but he's a good man, Manjul, always ready to help. When you cook something nice remember to send him a little."

That evening she smelt liquor on Sridhar's breath.

"Why did you drink?"

"Just a bit of rum. For your sake. Must talk to Bappa."

"Why are you so scared? Say you're taking your wife with you."

"You don't know my father...you've just been here for a month. You haven't seen anything yet! Once, my friend Pundalik and I plucked four tender coconuts from that palm, We ate them by the embankment in the field...he saw those empty shells and knew at once they were from his tree!

He caught hold of Subbu the coconut thief and accused him. I don't know how Subbu knew, but he told Bappa that it was me. And what a beating I got that day ...welts all over my body! Devappa mam came running and dragged me away. How he shook his fists and gesticulated at Bappa ! He's the only one in the village who dares to oppose my father ...but there's no enmity between them."

"You'll explain everything to your father, won't you?"

"Yes."

"What if he doesn't listen?"

"Let's see."

That evening when the old man washed his hands and feet and sat down on the arm chair Sridhar said softly

"There's a vacant room in the Unit. They've sent a railway pass too, I'll take her with me."

Bappa seemed confused for a moment. Then he roared,

"Go...Go! Take her with you. She must have asked you to do this! All this work in the fields and the orchard...all on my head! And then I have to cook and eat alone. Why should I worry? Let the fields be damned ...let everything go to waste ...I don't care!"

Bappa's voice rose so high that they were scared. "This is our last year in Shimla ...then we go to the border."

"Last year ...he says! You're not old yet ...lot's of time left. When your father dies you can sit with your wife in your arms all the time. But these are not good signs. You'll have to eat dust one day ..."

"But Bappa..."

"Not another word! Go. Take your wife. Never mind if your father dies!"

The old man got up in a huff and strode out into the darkness. "He'll go to Devappa mam's house and kick up a row, or he'll go to the cattle shed and sit by the oxen", Sridhar said. Manjul sat with her back against the wall. Sridhar brought the oil lamp from the kitchen and placed it on the porch. Picking up the lantern he stepped into the darkness calling out to his father again and again.

This was the first time Manjul was all alone in that huge house, yet fear and worry were not uppermost in her mind. She didn't know if the outer door was shut ...what filled her being was a deep abiding sense of rage...

When Sridhar reached Devappa's house the man was supping on a platter of rice gruel and a slice of salted mango. Bappa was nowhere in sight.

"Devappa mam, why do you eat gruel at night?" he asked, surprised.

Devappa cleared his throat making deep guttural sounds and gesticulated fiercely "aaavo ...aaa...avvvo... aaaavvvvooo" he went, almost ready to burst into tears. This business of cooking, serving, washing up ...all this is no work for a man. Rice gruel is easy ...he seemed to say. Sridhar felt sorry for the man and turned away ignoring

the loud sounds he made asking where he was off to so late in the night.

Bappa was sitting on the threshold of the cow shed.

"Let's go home, Bappa."

"I'm telling you, son, I won't till the fields any longer. Let them remain fallow or let some outsider grab the land ...I'll even sell the bullocks..."

"Bappa, I won't take her with me."

"Take her. Don't bother about me. It's in my fate ...this bitter broth. Have been drinking it for twenty years since your mother died...fed you the same all these years.. now I swallow it alone..."

"I won't take her with me. "

Bappa followed Sridhar home. He took to his bed for the next three days coughing and moaning loudly from time to time. Manjul didn't bother to check on him, she remained silent and listless. When there were just two days left for Sridhar to go Manjul said, "Let's go to Shiddar once. Bayul must be waiting to see us." "Why? Are there any more rituals left? No going anywhere. Stay here and do what Bappa says."

Manjul didn't say another word. Her husband's nose had turned red just like his father's did when he was going to fly into a rage. She didn't want any more trouble. He seemed very restless and upset on the day he was to leave, and she lay in his arms all night watching the shadows that seemed to play on his face. I want to go with you...I really do, she wanted to say.

She stood holding on to the door frame when it was time for him to leave, if she followed him into the court-yard she knew she would burst into tears. Her father-in-law stood right there so she couldn't even say a loving word in farewell. He left, and Manjul felt frustrated and unfulfilled...there was so much she had wanted to say...

Her father-in-law escorted his son to the pier and soon returned. "The launch came quickly and he got place to sit. Your father was there, he brought a packet of food for

Sridhar..moong laddoos his younger daughter had made", he said in mellow tones.

Manjul couldn't control herself any longer. She rushed inside overcome with emotion. After a while her father-in-law called out to her,

"The fields have been neglected, we've been so busy with the wedding. People are sowing their fields and we haven't even spread the dung yet. Get the basket. I'll fill it with dung from the cow shed. Go and spread it in the plantain orchard."

Manjul was dreaming of the journey to Shimla as she carried the basin of dung on her head. By launch from Hulgey to the fort. Then by bus to Goa. By train all the way to Delhi...and then...now how did he say he would go to Shimla? I forget ...and what was that tasty fruit he was talking about..?

"Come on, now...walk fast!" the old man yelled but there was no spring in Manjul's steps.

Her father-in-law was a true man of the soil, not because he owned vast tracts of land but because he took immense pains to cultivate every bit of it and gather the maximum possible yield. He worked on the land right through the year. When he ploughed the fields he forced the metal teeth of the plough deep into the ground till the oxen were exhausted and huge clods of hard earth were tossed up on the surface. He would not let a blade of wild grass or weed remain in his fields, and not a single ear of paddy was wasted during the reaping or the threshing.

He did all the work that the men and the women shared in the other fields - the ploughing, the breaking up of the hard clods by hand, the sowing, the weeding and everything else. The threshing platform would shake when he beat the huge sheaves against the ground to separate the ears of grain from the husk.

He'd brace a knee on the ground as he picked up a huge sack of paddy or a bale of hay all by himself, No one wanted to work in his fields because he was such a hard

task master. Better to sleep on an empty stomach than to work for Mhalu mam, they all said.

He was almost sixty but his appetite for work was still immense. It was just that his strength was failing him these days and he often lay awake moaning and clutching his stomach in pain after a hard day's work. In his good day's he could lift a heavy load on his head in the field by the stream and carry it home without stopping for rest. These days he had to prop the load against the mango tree on the way as he caught his breath. So he needed someone to help him with the work and Manjul was there at hand.

But Manjul was a mere slip of a girl, a slightly built figure who, though strong of will, lacked the physical strength needed for such work. She would be breathless by the time she carried a basin of dung to the field. Her palms would begin to bleed as she broke up the clods of earth. She would do the best she could, never give the old man cause to complain, she resolved.

Appa didn't let her work in his fields all day though she helped out with small jobs from time to time. Her father-in-law, however, expected her to pick up the implements and follow him as soon as he set off every day, raving and cursing if she were late. Only once, in these six months since she had been married, did she summon up the nerve to protest.

He was ploughing the field by the mango and she was turning up the soil along the borders of the field with a spade. The sun was blazing overhead. Her father-in-law gave her a metal tool and told her to break up the clods. She banged the tool down on the clod but it bounced away as though she was pounding a hard piece of rock.

"Why tear out the heart of the earth like this...such massive clods, like boulders ...I can't break these!"

She flounced off angrily to sit on the embankment drawing the end of her sari over her head to shield herself from the sun.

"Can't break them, she says! See how the wretch sits

there! You're not a big official's daughter to make such an excuse."

"But you are the only farmer who acts this way! What sort of work is this that sucks our blood!"

"As if I'm doing this only for myself! Do you think I'll eat all this..?"

"Who're you doing it for, then? Not for us! Let them be, then..let the fields be damned!"

The words were barely out of her mouth when the old man flew into a towering rage.

"Whose fields are you cursing, you wretched creature... damn your foul mouth..and damn your father's fields..you didn't bring this land as your dowry! One word more and I'll break your teeth!" he shrieked not bothering about the people working in the neighboring fields. Manjul almost died of embarrassment.

He suddenly unyoked the oxen and dropped the plough in the middle of the field. Swearing loudly he crossed to where Gopi was at work complaining loudly as he went.

"These girls from Shiddar village... they're just too smart!"

Gopi agreed.

Manjul got up silently and picked up the plough and other implements scattered in the fields. She set off homewards, sweat streaming out of her body, her nine yard sari trailing on the ground. She dropped the implements in the shed and lurched into the house. Who knows how long she lay there in a stupor of some sort for after a long time she was nudged into wakefulness by a voice that said

"It's very late Kaveri...you're still asleep. Won't you serve rice gruel?"

Who is this stranger addressing me by this strange name, she thought in a daze and it was only gradually that she realized where she was. This is my husband's father! She got up quickly and rushed to the kitchen. The gruel in the pot had congealed into a solid mass. She quickly heated some water and poured it into the rice and served

it along with some fish curry left over from the night before.

"It's very late now, so don't cook anything for lunch. Just grind some rice into flour and make bhakris for dinner. I'll get some shell fish for the curry..rice flour bhakris and fish curry...your husband is very fond of this."

Manjul sat by the wall in the outer room irritated by the cat and mouse game he played with her, by his scathing words which affected her deeply but had no effect on him after a while. She hated the way he cursed and abused her and then spoke in mellow tones when he wanted to get his work done.

Why does he work so hard, ...why is he so tight fisted... even sells what grows in the garden! A big bunch of bananas had formed on the tree, they were beginning to turn yellow and Manjul couldn't wait to eat one when suddenly he plucked the whole bunch and sold it.

Manjul watered the abole plants in the garden without fail but when the flowers formed on the plant her father-in-law plucked them and sold them to the flower woman Tulsi! One day when she wove them into a braid and wired them in her hair he was quick to complain.

"See how quickly they wilt...you'd have got four or eight annas at least if you'd sold them instead!"

Her husband wrote to her father-in-law at least twice a month but the old man would read the letters silently and then press them on to the wire hanging from the peg. Not a word would he say to her, She often felt like asking him if there was any message for her...

There was this ten or twelve year old boy, Subhash, who lived in the next house. He'd pass through their courtyard and call out to her but he never came into the house. One day Manjul grabbed him by the hand and drew him inside.

"Can you read Kannada, Subhash?" she asked.

"I'm in Class VII, in the Kannada medium, Vaini" he replied.

Manjul drew out five or six letters from the wire and gave them to him.

"See if my name 'Manjul' is written anywhere" she said.

"Who's Kaveri?" the boy asked, glancing through the sheets.

"That's my name, too!"

"Each letter says 'Give Kaveri my blessings' ...."

Manjul was beside herself with joy. She pressed a big slice of coconut and a piece of jaggery into the boy's hand.

'Kaveri' he writes! 'Kaveri'! So what if his father insisted on that name, does he have to use it, too? What a pretty name 'Manjul' is! Just let him get back. I won't respond if he calls me Kaveri, again!

Must tell my father-in-law to write and tell him not to touch liquor...but how can I tell him that? My mistake. Should have made him swear not to touch the stuff before he went ..swear on my head ...or at least in memory of his dead mother..!

When one went into the kitchen from the hall there was a room on the left side which was always dark and gloomy and had an uneven pitted floor. Its high stone walls seemed to close in on anyone who came there. There was a massive wooden bed in a corner, with posts as huge as an elephant's legs. It was covered with dust and had obviously not been cleaned for ages, the room was always kept shut.

Her father-in-law would sometimes go in there and stand with his hand against the wall. His bare back, covered with scales like that of a fish, was all that Manjul could see from outside. She'd keep thinking this man will now beat his head against those stone walls and give up his life there...but she couldn't summon up the courage to enter that room with him.

On the day before the Mahasti Jatra at the temple in

Hulgey an elderly woman stopped by the courtyard gate and looked around fearfully.

"Is he in ..?" she asked.

"Who?"

"Your father-in-law."

"No, He's gone to immerse the coconut husks in the river to make them rot."

The woman walked into the courtyard.

"I'm your mother-in-law's younger sister...would come often when she was alive ...but not when that demon is around! When my grandson was ill I vowed that I'd sweep the Mahasti temple courtyard with my hair..I've just done that. Thought I'd see my sister's daughter-in-law before I returned ...Is Sridhar all right?"

"Yes."

Manjul looked at the woman's mass of thick grey hair that hung in a loose untidy mop about her head. It was full of dust and bits of rubbish were entangled in it, it certainly looked like a broom, Manjul thought.

"Is that wretched bed still there in that room...not burned down yet?" the woman asked in fearful tones as she wandered about the house. Such a mature woman, yet the fear and apprehension that she had carried in her heart for so many years seemed to bubble out of her lips as she began to talk.

"My sister's elder son fell off that bed and broke his neck. I was here when the baby was born...that infant of six months crept to the edge of the bed and fell off ... couldn't hold his head up after that..died the next day. Bai wouldn't go near that bed after that. Kept telling her husband to burn it ...but he wouldn't listen

Seven years later Sridhar was born. Bai would sleep in the kitchen with the baby by her side... But when he turned a year old disaster struck again. Was here at that time too. I'm the youngest of her sisters ...would rush here again and again...

This demon gave my sister a lot of trouble...beat her

even! There were so many plantain trees in this orchard. One day a passerby asked for a sapling so Bai gave him two young plants ...let them flourish in some distant garden, she said. When this demon noticed the missing plants he flew into a rage and flung a piece of firewood at her. Such a deep gash on her head..so much blood! I began to scream! Then the demon grabbed her and laid her on that wretched bed...

When Bai became conscious again she begged us to take her off that bed but he wouldn't listen. Wouldn't let me take her out of that room either. He was always fighting with the other villagers, was scared they would know about her so he wouldn't call the doctor.

He looked after Bai when she was ill but the deep wound, her broken spirit and the wretched aura of that bed killed her slowly...in a month she was gone. As I placed the oil lamp by her corpse I saw that the wound on her head had healed...yet she was only skin and bones. If only she'd been taken off that wretched bed I'm sure she would not have died like that..."

Manjul felt herself sympathizing with all that her mother-in-law must have experienced in that distant past and her heart trembled with emotion and with fear. She pulled the latch on the door to that room.

"Come and stay with us sometime" she urged the woman.

'Sridhar is my nephew...I'm his aunt...but once relationships sour it's difficult to repair them again. If Bai were alive perhaps...and then there's that demon!"

The woman was almost at the gate when Manjul drew her back. "Your hair is a mess, let me comb it for you" She said. She massaged coconut oil into the woman's scalp, combed her hair and wound it into a bun tucking a fresh blossom into it.

"I'm your husband's mavshi..just like your mother-in-law. God bless you, my dear" the woman said.

She kept that room shut all the time. Sometimes she imagined that she could hear sounds of moaning and stifled sobs coming from there. Her father-in-law would go in there sometimes and when he emerged he would be tired and irritable and quarrel with her for no reason. He'd rave and rant and then he'd pick up a spade and work furiously in the garden.

Manjul's heart was heavy with apprehension in those days. That gloomy chamber which seemed to be watching her with dark evil eyes, and her father-in-law's furious displays of temper served to kill her spirit little by little.

Sometimes she'd be overcome by emotion, at other times she'd respond furiously to his taunts wounding him deliberately with her sharp words. He would sit down quietly at such times, (she often thought he was weeping silently), and then he'd do what she asked him to do, glancing at her helplessly, in silence.

The tiny store room with its massive key never failed to arouse Manjul's curiosity. She often watched him enter its dark confines and emerge almost immediately with whatever he wanted. One day he took an oil lamp into the room and called out to her, "Come here, Kaveri."

The air was musty and the room was full of soot and cobwebs as though everything there had remained untouched since the beginning of time. There were two large slabs of jaggery in a corner, a heap of coconuts on the floor and an assortment of large copper utensils and other household articles all over the place. Three boxes were placed one on top of the other. On one side stood four mudos, neatly stacked. Why had they been stored here, did they contain paddy or were they full of rice? The years of exposure to soot and dust had taken their toll and even the ropes that bound the mudos were crumbling and covered with soot.

Bappa couldn't recall what it was for a long time. Then he said, "That's full of honey. Someone brought it from Mallapur when Sridhar was still in school. Honey becomes

better as it grows older ...good medicine ...tomorrow when your children catch a cold or fall ill you can give them some."

Manjul felt uneasy, "What did you call me for" she asked. The old man lowered the boxes one by one. He squatted before the one at the bottom quite overcome by emotion and drew out a sari, a blouse, a nose ring and a necklace made up of nine gold sovereigns.

"Wear these" he said pressing them into Manjul's hands.

Manjul felt weighed down by the objects in her hands. It was as though he was trying to push her into some pit of sorrow and misfortune that had existed in this house since time began. This sorceror has opened a box full of sorrows and he wants to pile them upon my head ...the frayed sari and the blouse are stained with blood, the ornaments have some nameless curse on them...she thought.

Manjul set the objects on one side and rushed out of the room. Her father-in-law picked them up and came after her, "Put them on Kaveri, just once..." he pleaded.

"Why? They smell of cobwebs..."

"They belonged to your mother-in-law. Put them on, once ...like you would if she gave them to you herself..."

Manjul took the pile and went inside. When she emerged however, he gave a start.

"No, no! Take them off at once! They don't suit you..." he screamed.

"Why?"

Take them off, I say! None of you care for my happiness...I' m the one at fault..." he seemed to be talking to himself.

Manjul handed the small pile back to him but she kept the nose ring hidden in her fist.

"Where's the nath?

"I've kept it..."

"Give it, I say..." he screamed.

Manjul flung the nose ring on the ground. The old man seemed to lose his head, then, cursing her for the way she had been brought up .....how like a mad man he behaved at times!

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Manjul's body had filled out during the heady days after her marriage but she seemed shrunken and careworn these days. Her legs looked like sticks and she seemed to bend double under the weight of the basket on her head.

Her father-in-law was as unpredictable as ever. He'd rave and rant if she spilled some ears of paddy outside the threshing platform, or if she put some extra coconut into the curry. At other times he'd come up and say

"You've had a long day in the fields, let me grind the masala for the curry..".

When she asked him if she could go to shiddar for a couple of days he'd say "Go! Go! Don't stay back for my sake!" Then he'd take to his bed and lie there groaning for the rest of the day. Appa and Bayul were just across the river, but she had not seen them for over six months now. She yearned to be with them, they seemed to be calling out to her, a strange cry that drifted across the expanse of water and echoed in her ears... .

There were a lot of weeds growing amidst the plants in the fields this year and she had to do a lot of hoeing. If she asked her father-in-law to hire a couple of workers he said why don't you do as much as you can, let the rest of the weeds remain...

But she couldn't do that so she'd set off with a pot of gruel early in the morning and work in the fields till late. Let the old man cook something for the afternoon meal, she thought, but not once did he come to the fields with her lunch. He merely praised her glowingly when she got back home at the end of a long day.

It was raining in torrents these days and the lashing rain seemed like plumes of smoke above the fields. Manjul loved to stand amidst the rows of green plants with a palm frond umbrella over her head. The soft patter of rain drops on the umbrella seemed like music to her ears and as the wind rustled through the plants her heart would grow light.

Her back ached terribly as she stooped amongst the plants pulling out the weeds. By afternoon she would be tired and hungry and the pot of cold, watery rice gruel did nothing to assuage her hunger. She'd sit on the edge of the field and cry when she missed her father and Bayul. She'd think of her husband's uncaring attitude.....writes to his father doesn't even bother about me! and the old man doesn't tell me a word of what he says. Does he even know how his father treats me..?

She was working in the field by the river these days and her eyes strayed towards Shiddar village just across the river. She wanted to drop the hoe on the edge of the field and to cross the river, to see Appa and Bayul and to wander all over the vaddo for a while.

Someone told Appa that his daughter was working in the field by the river all alone these days. He was angry that the stingy old man was making her work so hard. He bought a string of fresh fish and said to Bayul,

"Let's make some tasty humman, I'll take lunch for Bai, she's working in the field they say."

Suman was excited and wanted to go too but the river was full of water and the ditches and gullies were over-flowing so her father refused to take her along.

She sat down in the courtyard to clean and cut the fish. Her father meanwhile, kept a pot to boil on the hearth and tossed in two measures of fragrant rice that had been set aside for a festive meal. He grated a whole coconut and ground it to a paste for the curry. He was always some

what aloof with Suman but today he seemed to have thawed a bit. He cut two plantain leaves and held them over the fire for a while to make them wilt. He then packed the rice and curry in them and set off with the packet wrapped in his blanket and the palm frond umbrella over his head.

The boatman refused to take him across the river. The boat would capsize in the wind, the rain and the strong current, he said. But appa seized the oar and stepped into the water,

"Will you come, or shall I go alone?" he asked.

"I'll come...I'll come..! But what do you need this umbrella for? It'll only blow away..and we'll capsize too!"

The boatman placed the umbrella in his hut and pushed the boat away from the shore.

"My daughter is supervising the work in their field just across the river. Such vast fields...stretching from the river to that clearing by the school...at least fifteen or twenty workers must be toiling in them! My daughter must have brought lunch for the workers—rice and fish curry! I thought I'd make some sweetmeats for her...so I cooked coconut and jaggery and cashew together. That's what I'm taking..."

The boatman gave him a strange look. He was plying the oar slowly, there was no strong wind but gusts of rain pelted them from time to time and the sky was overcast.

"Do you hear those voices, Tarya? They're the workers in my daughter's fields.. they're singing as they work..."

The boatman smiled mysteriously.

"Your daughter is married to Mhalu's son, isn't she? I know that man very well! The children from our settlement danced in his courtyard during the Shigmo festival and what did he give them?"

Ganesh's face fell at his words but he consoled himself, the man is jealous, that's why he talks so. No wonder that

youngster from Khargey beat him soundly with the oar the other day! But the boatman continued to talk as though he bore some grudge against Mhalu.

"His son Sridhar has been thin and weak since childhood, didn't want to join the army but this man dragged him to Karwar one day and forced him to stand in the line. His only son, that too!"

Ganesh pressed an anna into the boatman's palm and climbed onto the bank. He was walking away when the boatman called out,

"O uncle from Shiddar! Will you be returning home tonight or will you stay in your daughter's place?"

"I'll return..."

"Call out to me if I'm on the other side, I'll come across."

Ganesh had a fair idea where Bai's fields lay so he set off in that direction as the mud and slush stained his feet and splashed on his clothes.

Bai was stooping in the middle of the field engrossed in her work, no bigger than the plants amidst which she worked. Rows of bright green fields stretching as far as eye could see and in the middle was Bai, working alone.

"Bai!"

"Appa! How did you get here..."

"Bayul has made some tasty humman ...she said, take some for Bai..."

"How is she? Does she cook well?"

"Yes. As well as your mother did.... and you do... why don't you eat and see?"

Manjul washed her hands in a little pool in the field and sat down beside her father. She seemed to have shrunk into herself, a strong gust of wind would carry her away along with the umbrella she held aloft, Ganesh thought. Her hair was rough and dry as though it had not been oiled for a long time and the nine yard sari she wore dragged in the slush as though it was too heavy for her shrunken frame.

"Why does he make you work alone? Can't he hire a couple of workers at least?"

"Where do you get workers these days? But it's not hard work.. I'll manage. There are a lot of weeds this year ...It's fifteen or twenty days since I started weeding, still haven't finished."

Appa unpacked the lunch. Manjul divided it into two portions and the father and daughter began to eat. She ate with such relish that her father wondered if she were getting enough to eat at home.

"Bai does he give you enough to eat?"

"Ofcourse! I cook...I eat what I want..."

"But does he give you enough to cook?"

"Yes appa."

"Then why have you become so thin?'

"When was I ever fat? You haven't seen me for a long time, that's why..."

"Take care of yourself. You look like a bush of thorns!"

Manjul laughed. Appa looked at her feet which had turned white and shriveled up like a frog that had shed its skin. The soles were cracked and there were black stains where she had applied medicine.

"Heat some haldi in coconut oil and apply it to your feet at night. You stand in the water all day.. the skin on your soles is cracked."

Manjul looked at her father with love shining out of her eyes. She wanted to creep into the shelter of his arms and bask in the warmth of his love.

"Did your husband write?"

"He writes to my father-in-law."

"Not to you?"

"I can't read or write, so..."

Before they knew it, the sun which was overhead had slipped to the top of the hillock.

"It's getting late. Must go, Bai. You go home, now. "

"Won't you come home?"

"Not now. Once you finish with the hoeing come home

and stay a few days, Bayul said to tell you to come."

"I'll try, What about my father-in-law's food, though.,.."

"Didn't he cook his own food all these years?"

"But now he's got a daughter-in-law! Got used to good food. Nothing moves in that house without me...always Kaveri this...and Kaveri that!" Manjul laughed.

Appa was relieved.

"Will you go back and cook now?"

"If he gets back early with the cows he'll do something.. light the fire in the hearth, set the pot to boil."

Appa set off towards the river and Manjul climbed on to the embankment from the field.

"I'll send you my husband's address. Appa, tell Bayul to write to him.. let's see if he replies" she called out and appa waved his hand to show that he had understood.

Bai's face was wreathed in smiles as always yet Ganesh could sense that she was unhappy. Have I pushed my child into this pit of sorrow, he wondered. Couldn't teach her to read and write...there was no school in the vaddo in those days. And then her mother died and she had to look after her baby sister. His heart wrenched with grief.. what a brave attempt she made to show that she was happy but that's not true. God! What have I done! Pushed my daughter, delicate as a flower, into this terrible mess!

When he got to the river twilight was beginning to descend on the earth. It was raining in spurts and a cool wind had begun to blow. The hillocks beyond Hulgey, Kerwadi, Khargey and Shiddar were merging into the darkness. The fields, the coconut palms that dotted the villages and the bushes by the river, so fresh and green in the daytime, now took on the aura of darkness.

Ganesh called out loudly to the boatman, "Oooo..Oyyy... Taryaaa maam..!" but there was no reply. He called out again and again without stopping and his voice echoed like waves through the surrounding air. He could see something moving in the distance but there was no

answering call from the boatman. All of a sudden he heard the swish of oars and the boat loomed before him.

"Tarya, why didn't you respond to my call?"

"Thought I'd let you call out for some time, to wake up the whole place. If someone calls out loudly at this twilight hour ghosts and evil spirits take fright and run away..."

Ganesh sat down in the boat in silence. As they moved away the boatman remarked,

"Vishram says he saw that bride and bridegroom.., the ones that died when their boat overturned..".

Ganesh seemed to have no idea about what the man was talking about so the boatman began his tale.

"Must be sixty or seventy years ago.. or maybe it was a hundred...anyway, on one Trayodashi day in the month of Chaitra a wedding party was returning home with the bride when the boat suddenly capsized...there .... where the river takes a turn by Shiddaram hillock. Not a cloud in the sky, no strong breeze...

People say that the bridegroom's father went hunting just three days before the wedding and he killed a cow by mistake, thinking it to be a deer. Now, on the third night after that of the full moon every month, you can hear the lapping of waves and the sound of musical instruments as the bride and the groom rise from the water...The bride is as beautiful as a goddess in human form, their faces glow like gems as they make love on the rock by the river all night.

If you come across the sight make no sound! Move away quietly. Even today when a marriage procession passes by that site they float a small wicker basket in the river with a veedo placed in it to honour the couple."

Ganesh climbed out of the boat and walked along the edge of the water channel which seemed to merge with the darkness all around.

He felt that the Kali river, having emerged from some distant point in time must have vanished again into a realm of total darkness.

It was well past the lamp lighting hour when he got back home. Suman sat alone, nodding drowsily and peeping out into the darkness from time to time. Ganesh saw her sitting like a little bird in the pool of light cast by the oil lamp and his heart was awash with love. She got up with a start when she heard his foot steps.

"Did you see Bai, appa?"

"Yes."

"Did she say the humman was good?"

"Yes. Very tasty, she said. Have you eaten, Bayul?"

"I was waiting for you, appa."

Gokul came up to the window.

"Why are you so late, Ganesh? The little one was sitting here all alone...couldn't bear to see her so.. I kept coming here to the window..".

Ganesh sat leaning against the pillar on the verandah. This coconut palm was barely a few feet high when Bai got married, now it's bearing flowers and there'll be ten or twenty tiny coconuts on it soon!

Suman came from the well clutching a water pot against her hip with another smaller pot dangling from her hand. She crossed the courtyard briskly and entered the house. Appa was happy to see her strong and healthy but he was a worried man —God! I'm already weak and worn out, will I live long enough to get this girl settled in life?

Appa seemed to have lost all zest for life since Manjul got married six years ago. His whole world was bound by his fields and his home and it was more than four years since he had crossed the river or gone anywhere outside the village. Last year Manjul had pleaded with him to come for her son's ear piercing ceremony but he had not gone. He had bought a pair of gold ear rings and a towel and sent them with Suman.

He seemed to have withdrawn into himself since Manjul got married. Once robust of build, his flesh had long

since worn away and he was now like a skeleton with his skin sticking to his bones. God I've pushed my daughter into a bottomless pit of sorrow, she's not happy in her husband's house, he mused. Her father-in-law makes her work so hard and her husband, too, is good for nothing!

Anusuya was twenty four years old when we got married and then my mother passed away leaving her in complete control...Three years later Manjul was born. A baby boy came in five or six years, but he died immediately. Then, Bayul arrived after four years. The mid wife took one look at the umbilical cord when Manjul was born and declared that the children would come after long intervals...the loops in the cord were far apart. There could have been at least two more children after Bayul...Anusuya's face glowed so brightly when she was pregnant. I can still see that look..!

Sixteen years have passed since Anusuya died, this is the seventeenth! God! Only I know how I have lived these seventeen years...I can't take any more!

"Appa, why are you so shattered and run down these days? Look at my father-in-law, see how robust that old man is " Manjul had said one day.

"God made each of us differently...Mhalu works hard, raves and rants and showers curses on everyone, then he's fine. But people like us wither away remembering the past and worrying about the future...Mhalu doesn't even remember the fuss he kicks up every now and then, but you... you almost die each time...!"

Manjul's son was now one and a half year's old but her dream of accompanying her husband by train remained unfulfilled. He came home for two months every year but each time there were fresh problems added to those created by her father-in-law. He was transferred to the border for three years, then his unit took part in some war and when that was over he could not get quarters for his

family. Manjul believed he was just not interested in taking them with him but when she said so he flew into a rage,

"Why did your father get you married to an army man? Suffer, now!"

"Just like your father...hot tempered! Don't take me with you, then, I'll die here, slogging in these fields. Like a worker whom your father doesn't even have to pay!"

"But we have to get place to stay, Kaveri..."

"Don't call me Kaveri! I hate that name..."

"All right, what does it matter, Kaveri or Manjul ... Got a son this big and yet..!"

Manjul burst out laughing for he normally treated her very well. It was only sometime that he took out his anger and frustration with his father on her. There was a big trunk which he brought with him when he came home on leave. He kept some five or six bottles of rum in it and he would often go upstairs and take a swig or two. The liquid in the bottle, red as blood, made Manjul's hair stand on end. Now it will spill on to the ground and I shall swoon, she thought.

Sometimes he'd drink a bit more than usual and then he'd say, "I should have died in the war. Bappa would have learnt a lesson then..!"

"Why do you say such things! How much time does your father have left? We need you...my son and I...!"

Her father-in-law spoke to her sweetly whenever his son was around, it was only after he left that the old man put the yoke back around her neck. But Sridhar had begun to understand things these days and as the years passed he became taciturn and stubborn too. He wouldn't go to the fields any more when he came home on leave. He'd go visit the shops or he'd sit upstairs drinking with a friend. When the last of the rum was gone he bought a bottle of country liquor, much to Manjul's disgust.

Her father-in-law picked up his spade and worked in the garden, furious with his son.

"Other people's sons come home on leave and work in the fields. But not this fellow. Dumps everything on my head. What will he do when I die? And his wife is a fine one too! Teaches him all this. Once the fields turn fallow and useless they can roam about as they please!"

"Didn't you want to join the army?" Manjul asked her husband one day.

"Who told you this?"

"I' ve heard that your father forced you to join..."

Sridhar remained silent.

"If you're not happy there why don't you quit? We can live off the land here" Manjul looked at him full of love.

"It's not that easy. Bappa has to give an application saying that I ran away and joined the army against his will, that I am an only son, he needs me here. He won't do that, I know he won't!" Sridhar's tone held no hope.

"I'll give an application, then. I'm your wife."

"No, Manjul. I've made a lot of friends there, now..."

Manjul turned to him, worry and anger in her tone,

"Don't mix with those who drink ...I'm scared..."

Sridhar's face seemed innocent and childlike.

"When I get to the barracks I get so homesick..all those memories.. I drink to keep those memories away."

"What memories?"

"Not of any one person or thing...of my mother whom I can't even remember, of this village, the river..."

"And ..?"

"And of you. You make me suffer..."

Manjul looked at him like she would have looked at her infant son, yearning to draw him into her arm.

As suman turned sixteen her pale complexion deepened to a ruddy glow. Though short, she was brisk and agile and this, combined with her grey, almost golden eye, made her seem as graceful as a hibiscus flower swaying on its stem.

If she stood by the eastern wall of her living room she

could get a clear view of Bhaskar anna's house. Ganapati ajja's bathroom came in the way, otherwise she could have seen their house right from her door. Suman sat by this eastern wall whenever she removed the husk from the coconuts or cleaned the rice. She could see Govind pacing about the verandah with a book in his hands or sitting hunched up by the window in the upper room reciting his lessons aloud like a priest recites prayers.

Suman took pleasure in watching him study. Such a big boy, will be taking his Matriculation exams, yet he reads aloud like a young child! I'll tease him about this..I'll pinch him and laugh at him...then he'll get angry and hit me with a mango twig...

Nature seemed to have spread all her bounty before Suman's door — verdant green hillocks and fields stretched as far as eye could see and the Kali river glittered like molten silver beyond the swaying palm fronds. In the midst of all this stood Govind! Sometimes she imagined him rising up from the fields, sometimes she saw him splashing about in the river's silver glow!

As dusk descended on the land with its canopy of darkness Govind's voice would be muted and Suman would sit alone in her house fretful, restless. Read aloud, Govind, let the air resound with your voice, she urged him silently or come here and do your lessons by this lamp. Till just the other day you'd drop your satchel here and scatter all your books as you rushed off to play, why don't you come here now.

Shall we go to pluck kandla flowers by the river tomorrow? No, we'll go when your exams are over...I'll take you to Shiddaram hillock, to the three tall palms that stand on the summit. We'll peep into Shiddaram's hollow, that dark pit...you won't be scared, will you? Suman stared at the indistinct figure huddled in the light of that upstairs window, her eyes straining through the surrounding darkness.....

There were four or five mango trees in a row just

beyond Govind's uncle's house. There was the mango whose stone moved about within the fruit like a rattle, and there was the mango that could be sliced and eaten even when it is raw. There was one tree that was very tall, where the children would stand with hands outstretched when they spied a squirrel nibbling at the fruit, ready to grab it if it were to fall. And there was the sakarambo with its tiers of branches close to the ground...

Sometimes in the afternoon Suman would sit on a branch of the sakarambo and Govind would sit by her side. The trees cast a cool shadow in which birds and squirrels scampered about all day and the tree was so lush with foliage that they were quite hidden from anyone who happened to be passing by.

"Govind, I'm going to throw all your books into the Kali river tomorrow."

"Why?"

"When a man gets educated he leaves the village goes far away to earn money."

"So?"

"Won't you remember this river ...these fields ...how we plucked kandla flowers ...?"

"I will. But first I'll remember you."

"Really....?"

Suman was very happy. Her cheeks turned red and tears welled up in her golden eyes. "Then why do you want to go ..?"

"Who told you I'm going any where? My mama has brought me here to stay with him. And if I do go you come with me with your bundle on your head."

Suman leapt to the ground happily and tugged at his feet so that he lost his balance and fell to the ground.

"Go. Go and study, now," she said.

Govind stared at her, how well her body had filled out. His eyes strayed to her breasts ...when did this friend of my childhood change so, he thought. This glow on her face, this aroma ... Is it from her body or from

the blossoms on the sakarambo?

"What are you staring at?"

"How fat you've grown."

"Don't I look nice?"

"Yes."

"You've grown tall too. Now you'll grow fat. The hair on your face is turning dark ... You'll grow a beard and a moustache soon ...then you'll be a man."

"We won't be able to play together, then?"

"No. They'll tease us ..."

"What'll we do then?"

"Shall I tell you?"

"Tell."

"No. You're mad. Go and study, now.."

"Look ... don't say I'm mad ... I'll hit you ..!"

"Hit me. Snap off that mango twig and hit me ....."

Suman went up to him.

"No. I'll never hit you. When we were small you would hit me ...pinch and scratch me too ...but did I ever hit you?"

Suman's eyes welled up with tears. She stared at the boy whose face was as clear as butter, as innocent as that of a small child. One can look right into his soul through his eyes, she thought. Even when he grows up and becomes a man the childlike innocence on his face will continue to shine.

The different households that made up this vaddo belonged to the same family originally, they were like the twigs and branches that sprout from the trunk of a mighty tree. Each man was brother or a cousin, each woman someone's aunt ... These people treated their brother's wife as they would treat their mother so there was no distrust or misbehavior.

The elders say that many years ago someone misbehaved with a young girl in the vaddo and she became

pregnant. Her father and uncles tried to force her to name the culprit but she refused and one night she jumped into the river. They buried her on the river bank and rolled a massive boulder on to the grave. People say that if you sit on this boulder marking the grave of the unwed mother you can still hear sounds of weeping coming from under the ground.

Govind was each man's nephew, the son of a woman born in this village but married into another clan. Yet he had become so much a part of the village that everyone treated him as they treated the children of their own clan, Balu and Ashok and Manu and all the others who were like brothers to Suman. It was only when Suman came of age and her body began to fill out and when the hair on Govind's upper lip took on a darker tint that people, especially the women folk, sat up and took notice.

"He is a nephew ... He can't be like a brother to her ....* He has the right to marry any of the girls in this village ...!" They said.

"But Govind is younger than Suman, isn't he?"

"Rubbish! When Govind's mother Vatsal came to her mother's house with the infant in her arms Anusuya was expecting Suman. She'd go to the fields with her big stomach to pull out the weeds. I remember saying 'Don't. It hurts the baby in your stomach." I know. Govind was born in the month of Meerg but Suman was born after

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* Cross cousin marriages (where a man marries the daughter of his mama or maternal uncle) are accepted amongst Konkani people. The 'nephew'. in such cases is treated as a prospective son-in-law by the entire village. Parallel cousins (the children of two sisters or two brothers) are regarded as siblings and cannot intermarry. In the present context, Govind may marry Suman because she is his mother's brother's daughter and they belong to two different clans. If Govind is adopted by his uncle Bhaskar he will take his uncle's name and be like a son to him. He will then be like a 'son' to everyone in the village and like a 'brother' to Suman, making it impossible for them to marry.

Chavoth. She's three or four months younger."

It was only when Suman and Govind went up to Shiddaram hillock one day that the women of the vaddo lost their tempers. The three palms had always seemed to beckon Suman right from the time she was a child, and she always wanted to go and sit right under them.

The trees stood close together at the top of the hillock as though they were talking to each other, their tops almost touching the sky. On bright sunny days the palms seemed to grow even taller, receding into the distance, but when the shadows fell on the hill slopes they grew short almost within hand's reach.

Govind's exams got over and she told him of her plan.

"But what will we do on that hill?"

"We'll gather fruits and wild berries ...I want to go up there. How pretty the village and the river and everything else will look, maybe we'll see your village Asnoti."

"But what will I tell mama?"

"Tell him you have some work in the school. Or say you're going to your friend's house by the temple."

"And what will you say?"

"I'll tell appa I'm going with Govind to gather berries and fruits."

"Won't he get angry?"

"Appa doesn't get angry any more, doesn't curse like he used to. Just sits silently. And calls out to Aai in his sleep. That day he took out her old, nine yard sari from the trunk and draped it all over the room ...." Suman's voice caught in her throat and her eyes filled with tears.

The sun had risen as high as a coconut palm when they crossed the fields and reached the foot of the hill. The sun's rays seemed to slide down the slope of the hill and into the river glittering like silver as they danced upon the shrubs and bushes that grew thickly on the bank. It was as though all of Nature was immersed in a flood of light.

The rains were over and the clear sunlight bathed the surroundings which Nature had clothed in verdant green.

People, young and old, roamed about the woods gathering twigs, branches, roots and leaves — this would continue for four months from Karthick to the month of Magh and the woods would resound with their activities.

When Suman and Govind looked up from the foot of the hill they could see the three palms with their massive trunks and canopy of thick fronds. Between them, however was the hill side which rose steeply from where they stood.

"Didn't seem so steep from our back door, did it Suman?"

"Never mind. We've got to reach the top."

They began to climb the hill. Suddenly they heard someone calling out to the ten or twelve cows grazing nearby and a man, dressed in a kashti with only a tattered blanket thrown over his shoulder, strode down the slope to their side. Suman recognized him at once.

"Tatu mam, we're going up to the palm trees on the summit" she said.

"Why? To get palm fronds to build a matov for your wedding?"

You're Ganesh mam's daughter from the lower vaddo aren't you? But it's not so easy to get there .... cross this slope and you reach the forest, and can anyone cross that? You'll go mad ..for the trees turn silent and you'll lose your way, not knowing east from west ... And you! I know you, you're Bhaskar's nephew. Sit here, don't go up."

"But we have to go. Come on, Suman. See, that's the Ghangre rock, that's in the east."

The two youngsters began to climb the hill paying no attention to his words.

"I'll be here calling out to the cows. When you can't go further hear my call and come down this way", he said.

When they had climbed for about half an hour the path before them suddenly vanished as though someone had rolled it up and taken it away. There was only a wall of shrubs and bushes and thorny thickets with tall

trees shooting up from their midst. The whole mass of vegetation seemed poised to spring towards them, and the three palm trees on the summit were nowhere to be seen.

"Suman, let's to back."

Suman looked around nervously, is this the same hillock I used to see from the back door of our house? Two huge branches cut across their path as though blocking the way. There was a gash in the trunk of a jamb tree which looked like its mouth and Suman kept thinking that the tree was going to say something. She eyed the tender pale green leaves gleaming in the sun and thought the tree was laughing at them.

"Let's sit in that clearing for a moment, Govind." They sat down, quite at a loss for words.

A colourful scene appeared before them, a huge painted curtain unfurled before their eyes. The Ghangre Rock, the river, the islands and fields ringed by this unending chain of hillocks! And in their midst, as pretty as the decorated platter of rice and coconuts offered to the dancers at Shigmo, were the seven villages that flanked the river.

The two youngsters however could make out little from this height.

"Is that the Ambe island, Suman?"

"No. That must be the island by Khargey village."

"You said we could see Asnoti from here ...?"

"I don't know ... Maybe if we went up to the summit ...."

They sat there in silence and Govind suddenly realised that they were alone in this wilderness. He stared at Suman's flushed face with the sweat running down her neck towards her high breasts.

"What are you staring at, like that?"

"Nothing .... Balu, Manu and the others keep teasing me. They say I'm your husband."

Suman burst out laughing.

"Don't you fight with them, then?"

"No. I like it."

Suman's heart began to beat rapidly. She clutched at his shoulder as though she needed support, then she sprang away.

"Let's go down" she said.

"Suman, can I take you in my arms? Just once?"

"No."

"Are you angry with me ...?"

"No... you're so good, how can I be angry ...?"

"Then ...?"

"Unmarried girls shouldn't touch men that way ... It's a sin!"

They could hear the whistling and chirping of the birds in the woods as they began to descend the hill slope. From time to time they heard booming sounds as though someone was speaking into a large copper pot.

"Suman, look! Seetachavar ...! I'll get some for your hair."

He rushed into a thicket and brought back a fistful of Seetachavar and some bright red Pitkole blossoms which Suman tucked into her hair. Tatu the cowherd was sitting on a rock near the foot of the hill.

"You look like a goddess with all those flowers in your hair!" he exclaimed. "When Ravana was dragging Seeta away her necklace broke and the beads rolled all over the place. They took root and tiny leaves appeared ..... The flowers would bloom in welcome when Seeta came that way again ..... But she never did. She went back by the vimana. That's why this plant bears no flowers ... Only leaves that stand erect like peacock feathers ... You won't find a prettier leaf anywhere in the world!"

Suman and Govind listened to him without a word.

"Did you go up to the summit?"

"No Tatu mam. There's no way up ..."

"I know. The holy men, the Shidda purush have

blocked all the paths. They don't want to be disturbed when they are doing penance."

"What penance?"

"Those three palms that you see ...they're three holy men. For centuries they've been doing penance there with their heads on the ground and their feet up in the air. Their hair has turned into roots and their toes have sprouted leaves which grow higher and higher. The day their feet touch the sky they will stop growing and their penance will come to an end. They will come down to earth and all our sorrows will vanish!"

Suman stared at the cowherd who seemed like a log of wood that had sprouted arms and legs. His face and body were burnt dark by the sun, his limbs were like sticks and he carried a pair of worn slippers which he shuffled into when he had to cross a patch of pebbles or of thorns. Only his eyes glittered as they darted over the cows and everything around.

"Tatu mam, they've harvested the crop and even the threshing is done. No one tends the cattle any more, why do you roam here?"

Tatu's voice suddenly grew loud.

"So what? The cane fields are there, so are the gardens. What happens if the cows get in there?"

"In our vaddo the cows are let loose. We only tend them during the rains, why bother in the summer?"

Tatu laughed aloud like a small child.

"I'm a cowherd ... The youngest of five sons. I was so thin and weak as a child that this became my job. It still is. We have lots of fields but I have never dug a spade into the land. The family broke up and each brother took his share ... Only I tend everyone's cows still, walk into any brother's house when I feel hungry. They got me married but she was mad, would roam about the village all night. Then she jumped into a well."

He spoke like a wayfarer who meets another soul after travelling alone for days, who keeps talking without pause

to unburden the load on his heart and to hasten the passage of time.

"Sit here on this rock awhile ...Do you know that the forest has life ...it cries, laughs, whistles. When a dark cloud hovers overhead, its pores open and it yearns for the rain. When the earth smoulders in Chaitra and Vaishakh I've heard it groan in pain... Last year on Karthick Punav my sister-in-law packed the festive meal and sent it here ... My cows and my forest. That's my life!"

Suman looked at him strangely, "We must go now" she said.

"I spoke to you here, but my tongue is stilled in the village. People think I am dumb ...." Tatu called after them as they sped into the fields. They looked back to see him standing on the rock like one of the trees in the forest, was it a tree that spoke to us all this while?

The women of the vaddo were waiting for them, angry, suspicious.

"Where did you go, Suman?" Ambu mavshi demanded as soon as she set foot in the alley.

"Nowhere. Just wandered around."

"Telling lies, you wretch! Going off into the woods with a man ...?"

"No mavshi."

"Then where did you get those Seetachavars from ... Do they grow anywhere else?"

Suman was silent. Gokul mavshi walked all around staring at her intently.

"What did you do there? Used to roam around the vaddo all these years, now you've started going into the woods? Your mother is dead so you think you're free ... But listen, you wretch, if you are up to anything like that I'll take a cane and whip you myself!"

Sumitra kaki was standing on one side. She caught hold of Suman's hand and led her into the house.

"Get along, now, go and sit by your aunt's side" she said to Govind. "The hair above your lip hasn't darkened

yet and you're going into the woods with your mama's daughter!"

Sumitra laid a soft hand on Suman's back.

"You are a motherless child ... All the women in the vaddo are like mothers to you, that's why they say all this. You have come of age now, you mustn't run around with boys any more."

"Govind is a good boy, kaki. I like it when he is around."

"We don't tell you not to talk to him ... What will happen to you tomorrow is written in your fate. But guard yourself, now, if a girl funs around too much she seems cheap ... A woman's body should be like a closed fist!"

Suman sat in her house, silent and morose. She felt that she was suspended somewhere beyond human relationships, there was no one she could call her own. She had never been so dejected since the time Bai got married, why did these people have to drag Govind, who was her closest friend, away?

But she wasn't going to break her friendship with him, she still sat by the east wall of the house keeping an eye on his activities and sometimes he dropped in at her house, too. Yet, whenever he appeared now her heart beat uncontrollably and she couldn't laugh and joke as she used to. They would talk in measured tones, their eyes darting this way and that — Suman realised that her childhood had finally come to an end.

In the old days appa would roll tobacco in tiny strips of plantain leaf and make beedis every night. He would keep them in a cloth bag and smoke them throughout the day, coughing from time to time. But suddenly he stopped smoking. He just sat silently leaning against the wall, staring into the distance as though looking for light. Suddenly his tongue would break

loose and he would begin to rave,

"Wretches! Ploughing fields like they're running a rag over the floor! Hold the metal part of the plough erect ... tear the earth's heart open, bring the clods to the surface ... make the oxen sweat and shit! And then you say the harvest is no good, the rains let you down or the wind was too treacherous .... work till your bones give way first, only then will your crop be bountiful! You've all become soft ... eating soft rice like the sepoys and service men, no stomach for rough, unpolished rice any more. You use the government distributed fertilizer like sugar, no time for leaves and dung any more!"

"Appa smoke a beedi" Suman would plead,

"Don't want to. Bayul, do you think of Bai? Do you remember what your Aai looked like?"

"No appa."

"Bai does. Says she looked like the Moon goddess with white kandla flowers in her hair..."

Suman would be moved to tears at the way he behaved these days and she would rush into the kitchen and weep. Late one night Suman woke up to hear someone calling at their door. It was Keshav anna and his wife Devki.

"Is Ganesh bab sleeping inside?"

Keshav took the lantern and went in to check. The reed mat was rolled up against the wall, Ganesh was nowhere in sight. Suman began to wail,

What's happened Keshav anna, what's the matter Mavshi ....?"

"Your father is ploughing his field in the middle of the night. We thought it must be him so we came to check..."

They stood on the edge of the court yard, listening intently. "ammmmmmmm .... haiiiiii ....arrrrarrraaaaa .... aaaaammmmm .....haiiiiiiii! Smear turmeric on their faces ... Let their cowshed roofs collapse ...!" Ganesh roared in the distance.

"The Katy constellation hasn't crossed our heads yet and this fellow is ploughing his field! Can he even

see the furrows properly?"

Appa was yelling at the oxen like a man possessed and striking his stick against their flanks.

"Someone go and bring him home ..." Suman sobbed.

"He won't listen. Not till he ploughs a few furrows at least. You go and sleep."

Devki took her by the hand and led her inside. Suman sat there listening to her father's voice in the distance. She didn't know when she became drowsy and fell asleep on the floor. When she awoke the next morning she saw that her father was lying on his reed mat with his blanket drawn up over his head. She thought she heard him moan so she rushed to wake him up, "Appa ...Appa ..."she called.

Appa drew his head out of the blanket and blinked.

"Why did you plough the field in the night, appa? She asked.

"Can't you hear the ocean roar just beyond the hill? The river has shrunk and its water has gone up into the sky. It'll rain any day now ...yet these people sit with their seeds stocked in their homes! Tomorrow when it starts raining they'll have to roast their seeds and then sow them ...."

"Don't say such things ... appa ... Get up, I'll make tea."

Ganesh ploughed his entire field thrice. He'd set off with all the implements driving the oxen before him and spend the whole day and part of the night in the fields. When he wasn't guiding the plough he was digging the land at the edge of the field or strengthening the embankments or breaking up the clods. God knows what gave him the strength to do all this, he never seemed tired even in the searing afternoon heat of Chaitra and Vaishakh.

"It will rain any day now .... set the seeds to sprout and get your fields ready. The rain is waiting to trick you ..." He said to every one he met.

These days the village was deserted as everyone was

busy in the fields. Some farmers guided their ploughs, others scattered fertilizer or strengthened the ridges and embankments. The rituals to be performed before the sowing were conducted and people stepped into the fields with reed platters full of seeds.

Ganesh sowed his entire stretch of land with six khannis of paddy in a matter of fifteen days. He didn't let Suman rest, either. She'd get up at dawn to cook the bhakris and brew tea and set off for the fields with the basket of seedlings balanced on her head. She'd work there by his side till the sun rose high up in the sky. And then there were his meals which she carried to the field, the hay and the rice water for the oxen!

He finished sowing the fields and suddenly the spirit that possessed him seemed to be stilled.

"Finished already ... Very quickly this time ...?" Ram dada called out as Ganesh walked along the embankments in silence.

"Yes. The land was ready so I ploughed it once again and finished with the sowing and the watering. It's late already."

"You're lucky. You just have to sow your field and wait for the rain. You don't have to cut furrows like we do."

"My land is flat and fertile ...it'll give me a kumbh of paddy for every khandi I sow."

"Ofcourse it will .... Ofcourse it will! So when is the celebration, when do you throw a feast?"

"A feast! I've emptied everything there was in the house into these fields! The sky is spouting fire and you talk of feasting! Let the seeds sprout first, let the tiny plants appear ..."

Ram dada's wife Bhagirathi was listening to the conversation.

"Who says Ganesh is mad, he's talking quite sensibly, I think."

"But have you heard him talk so much ever before? These days he works like one possessed and then he talks

without stopping. Who knows what's wrong."

The next morning when Suman went to the cow shed to set the animals loose she saw that Shibro's back was sore and swollen and that he couldn't move his head.

"Appa! See what's happened to Shibro!" she screamed.

Appa rushed to the cow shed, so did Keshav who was gathering dung and Khushali who was setting off for the fields.

Throughout the rainy season the people of the vaddo kept their animals in the sheds on the slopes of the hill. In the summer months, however thy built reed shacks by the vaddo, and every tree in the area had a thatched cow shed in its shade.

"Ganesh dada, the animal's shoulder is swollen. You ploughed deep with the metal part of the plough erect and then you beat the oxen forcing them along...From cock's crow till noon and again in the evening without rest. What came over you these last ten or twelve days? Poor dumb animals...we farmers have to look after them!"

Ganesh stroked the bullock, "What's happened to my dear one...my pet..." he wept.

"Don't worry Ganesh dada, once the pain goes he'll get better. Fetch the bark of the podley tree and foment the wound with its juice."

"Worm eaten year this is, Keshav, I tell you! The Sankrant has come riding on a camel. The early rains will fail this year and the germ will dry up inside the grain. When the Sankrant rides on a buffalo it signifies floods... but when it comes on a camel there will be drought and famine in the land. Or why would my bullock, strong as an elephant get hurt? You fight year after year over the boundaries of your fields.... now suffer!"

Ganesh brought a huge bundle of bark from the woods and chopped it fine. He boiled the pieces in a pot and spent the whole evening bathing the wound with this brew. He

tossed his blanket over his shoulder and told Suman that he'd spend the night in the cow shed.

"Don't appa, what will you do there now?" she protested.

" My dear one wallows in pain there and you tell me to sleep comfortably? He'll never bear the yoke around his neck again, how long can he do that? It's this hand of mine...like a demon's...I beat him with a stick! That poor creature, mild as honey ...Bai will never forgive me now."

Suman stared at him muttering to himself as he set off into the night. She called out again and again but her voice was lost in the darkness. The lamp cast a reddish glow inside the house and the mudos full of grain and pulses, the gourds and pumpkins hanging from the ceiling, the coils of rope and the rows of pots formed eerie shadows all around. Suman was scared and rushed out again.

"Govind...O Govind! Why don't you come? Keep appa company...or come and sit here ...why have you moved away?"

She didn't know if she had called out aloud to Govind or if it had been a silent cry. But Govind was here with appa in the evening...what's wrong with me...why am I so nervous, she thought. She rushed to the east wall of the house and stared outside. Govind's uncle's house and all the surroundings were steeped in darkness. A lantern glowed in the upper room but there was no one in sight. She stood there for a long time waiting to see if someone moved...

The people of the vaddo finished sowing the fields which lay on flat ground, only the fields on the hill slopes remained to be sown. Everyone waited eagerly for the rains. The month of Rohini which normally saw scattered showers passed, and Meerg the month of heavy rainfall

was almost over, yet there was not a drop of rain. Only the barren sky above with not a black cloud in sight, and the thirsty earth below, open to the scorching sun. The stars filled the sky with their glow at night and the sun beat down fiercely throughout the day.

"Who has ever seen such a barren sky in Meerg..? Men have become dishonest, they uproot the stones that border two fields right before your eyes... this is God's punishment, surely!"

As the sun beat down fiercely on the land Ganesh became restive. At dawn and at dusk and even in the searing heat of noon he wandered about the fields, his bare feet scorched by the hot dust, the skin on his face sunburnt and dry.

One day Ambu mavshi was drawing water when the pot touched the bottom of the well and came up with just a little muddy water.

"The earth's breasts are dry, there's not a trace of moisture in the sky... how can there be any water in the well, then?" she ranted, and as she lifted her head she saw a bare headed figure tramping through the fields, his feet seeming to tread through fire.

It was Ganesh. Though he had walked in the hot sun there was not a trace of sweat on his face, he just seemed shriveled up and dry.

"Ganesh ! Why do you kill yourself like this...wandering in the heat?"

Ganesh merely held out his palm as though it were full of grain.

"See what has happened to the grain Ambu vaini...it won't rain even if someone dies! It's been a hundred years since our ancestors settled here...our time has run out... now we can uproot the stakes, pick up our gods and move..!"

"What wretched words are these ! If we uproot the stakes our ancestors stuck into the ground nothing will be left of this clan..!"

"The kanki bush has broken out in thorns...we'll have to eat those thorns this year, there will be no rain...you were the one who dressed Anusuya's corpse, you tucked the last hibiscus flower into her hair...do you remember how it rained that day, how the wood on the pyre was soaked! And yet it caught fire, like camphor! It should rain like that today...roasted as we are by the sun!"

Ambu mavshi hoisted the pot on to her hip. Grown up daughter hanging about his neck and this man chooses to go off his head!

One evening all of a sudden a cool breeze began to blow and the sky filled up with dark clouds. Thunder rumbled like a drum in the sky and the soft drizzle soon became a steady shower. It was not only man who was filled with joy , even the shrubs and trees welcomed the rain dancing like peacocks, or so it seemed.

Appa was savoring the sight of the water gushing down from the eaves like a thirsty man would savour each gulp. Suddenly he sprang up, grabbed his blanket and plunged out into the rain.

"Where are you going appa?"

"To the fields. To check the embankments. If they collapse the river will flow in. Let me soak in the rain a bit ...when your Aai died it rained just like this, Bayul, no one could do anything about it."

Suman stared silently after him. When he did not return at dusk she began to feel scared. Rain fell in torrents, swirling like white smoke, like a grey curtain before her eyes. Beyond that was impenetrable darkness, that seemed without end.. She stood on the porch calling out to him, and as time passed her voice was broken by sobs.

Where had the man gone in this torrential rain, as it is he was out of his mind. Avdu ajji who had been standing by her window all this while came up to Suman's door. Sumitra and her husband Narshinv walked in, so did Gokul mavshi and Khushali. One by one Bhaskar anna, his

nephew Govind and so many others drifted in. Some squatted in the house, others stood in the court yard holding something up to shelter their heads.

Khushali stood at the edge of the court yard and called out in his deep masculine voice but there was no response.

Where has this man gone now! Khushali, Narshinv.. take this lantern and go and look around. Go as far as the temple if possible..." Bhaskar declared.

Govind took the umbrella from his uncle. "What are you going for, Govind?"

"No mama, I must ! I must go and look for him..." He rushed off with Narshinv and the other men. Sadashiv's wife Vishranti suddenly declared that when she was returning home at dusk she had seen Ganesh standing on the embankment there by those fields.

"Telling us, now! Where were you all this time?" Khushali turned to her angrily.

"Must have been asleep with her infant at her breast.. don't be angry with her" Avdu ajji soothed.

The men were tramping along the embankments calling out to Ganesh. Some of them had umbrellas, others sought to shelter their heads under blankets. The rain had turned the fields into muddy swamps and many of them slipped on the narrow ridges and fell into the water logged fields.

Ganesh was sprawled against a particularly steep stretch of embankment, the blanket had slipped off his head and he was soaked to the skin. Govind cried "Mama!" and rushed to embrace him as the others trained the light of the lantern on his face,

"Ganesh bab, what are you doing here?"

Ganesh muttered something as though he was just waking from a deep sleep and they helped him to his feet. When Suman saw the group of men holding her father up and supporting him home the strength went out of her body and she slumped to the floor. The people of the vaddo, however, bustled about. The men dried him with a

towel and wrapped a fresh cloth around his waist. Ambu mavshi placed a live coal in a pan before him, while Sumitra poured a raw egg down his throat, Ganesh merely sat like a god, letting them do what they liked.

"Why are you sitting here like this. Get him something to eat" Gokul mavshi snapped at Suman.

Suman served some rice and shrimp curry which she had made at lunch time and placed the plate before her father. He fiddled with the rice for a while so Suman made a small ball of the rice and curry and put it in his mouth. Who knows what Ganesh was thinking about, all of a sudden he began to eat as though in a tremendous hurry, and soon he was done.

By morning the sky was clear and appa had recovered, too. 'Where are you going appa" she called out as he picked up the spade and shovel, "are you sure you'll be able to work?"

"I'm going to the field by the tender mango tree.. to strengthen the ridges. Anusuya used to work in that field.. it will bear fruit again this year..." he seemed to be talking to himself.

When Manjul heard that appa was not keeping well she came rushing home.

"Where are you off to? The young plants are ready and must be transplanted... is this any time to visit your father's house?" her father-in-law demanded but she merely picked up her infant son and set off.

She was so worried about her father that she didn't even know how she crossed the river and got home. Ganesh stared at her like a cow gazes at its calf, with all his love shining out of his eyes.

"Bayul, Bai has come. Unhusk four coconuts and give them to her" he said, and then he was silent again.

Manjul sat before him and wept for a while.

"Don't do this appa, control yourself ! Forget about

me, who will look after Bayul now? Don't worry...what god has planned will occur...you must be strong," she said.

The women of the vaddo came to see Manjul. They told her how Ganesh used to behave, what he used to say.. and as she listened to them Manjul became increasingly depressed, she sat there with her head sunk in her hands.

Suman, however, whirled about the vaddo with Manjul's son Ramesh, and the two year old child laughed and prattled in his aunt's arms. She took some boiled rice from the pot and cooked it into a kheer with jaggery and coconut and fed it to the child. When it was time for Manjul to return Suman didn't want to hand the child back to its mother, nor would the boy stop clutching his aunt.

"Appa, I'm going now" Manjul said when it was time to leave.

"Bai is going.. Bai is going..." Ganesh repeated again and again.

"When the sowing is done, after fifteen days or so I'll come again and we'll take appa to some ghadi or joishi or to the doctor at Karwar. I met Sadashiv bab just now.. he said some man from the other vaddo died last year after falling off a tree. His last rites were not performed properly so he must have turned into a Mharu or ghost. Maybe he crossed appa's path..."

"I don't know Bai, I'm scared!"

"Don't be. He's our father, we have to look after him. Just see that he eats properly. If you have to, go and call Ganapati ajjo or Bhaskar anna ...they're our uncles, they'll come running to help."

The two sisters walked towards the river.

"Your Bhavoji hasn't written for three months now. Have you heard from him?" Manjul blurted out anxiously all of a sudden.

"No. Why?"

"Never mind. He'll write."

Suddenly Govind came running towards them.

"Tai, you're going...didn't even meet me" he said.

"I'm in a hurry Govind, just dropped the basket in the field and came here."

"Tai, has Bhavoji written recently?"

"Yes. Ofcourse."

"And are you well?"

"Yes. Now, take care of appa" Manjul said to them.

Appa was standing in the courtyard.

"Tell your father-in-law we'll sacrifice a cock with upturned feathers on the next moonless night ...must keep the Betal happy.." he called out loudly.

Manjul pretended not to hear him. She was scared that she would burst into tears. Suman and Govind returned home and sat down side by side. Who knows how long they sat there without a word.

When four months had passed without a letter from her husband Manjul was scared out of her wits. She sat staring at the road, if someone got off the boat and walked towards their house her heart started beating rapidly. Whenever the postman came to the village she'd run out hopefully into the lane, but days passed like this and she became increasingly nervous.

Her father-in-law, too, was sick with worry, he'd written four letters to his son but there was no reply. His skin hung in loose folds now and his voice was hoarse and tremulous. He didn't curse the bullocks or yell at his daughter-in-law any longer, he merely lay in bed moaning when he returned from the fields,

"Narayana! Lord, where is my son!"

One day he handed Manjul a blank inland letter.

"You write, this time. Get someone to write it for you.... write a loving letter... maybe he's angry with me, that's why he doesn't write."

Manjul clutched the letter with trembling fingers.

"You're not smart enough to keep your husband tied to you. Look at other wives ... see how they hold their husbands controlled in their fists..."He grumbled as he left the house.

Manjul was amazed. You had to have control over everything, what could I do! When he wanted to take his wife with him you objected. And even then you accused him of being preoccupied with his wife!

Manjul had started something new these days. Whenever she heard that someone in the surrounding villages of Karwar district was home on leave from the army she would rush there to meet him. Sometimes she'd take her son with her, at other times she'd leave him at home. She'd been to Baad, Gadh, Majali, Mudgeri, Asnoti and Hankon within the space of a month. While returning from Baburao Salukhe's place at Asnoti she'd walked fifteen miles and crossed two streams, one at Hankon and the other at Halgey.

While boarding at Hankon she lost her footing in the slush and almost fell headlong into the boat. Her clothes were drenched. The boatman stared at this unfamiliar woman,

"Who are you, lady, haven't seen you here before?" he said.

Manjul almost burst into tears.

"I'm from Hulgey, mama...my husband's in the army. No news from him for five months. Went to see if someone in Asnoti could give me any information."

"There's no war going on now, why doesn't he write then? Got any news from this man in Asnoti?"

"No. They're not posted in the same place, that man said."

This kept happening each time. Manjul rushed to meet whoever came home on leave from the army but these men were invariably posted in Kashmir or Punjab or Delhi and most of them were in the Infantry or the Artillery. Sridhar, however, was in the supplies division in Assam.

An elderly man was sitting in the boat, too. Tall and broad, he wore short khaki pants and a white coat with big buttons. His moustache and eyebrows were grey but his hair was black, still .

"Do you know what division your husband is in?" he suddenly asked.

"Supplies. In Assam."

"No use rushing up and down like this. Most of these bullocks in Karwar are in the Infantry or the Artillery. I was, too. First check if someone out here is in Supplies, then go to meet him or at least write to him. I'll try and find out too. What's your husband's name?"

By the time Manjul gave him all the information the boat had touched the other bank. The boatman scooped some water in his palm and sprinkled it on her head.

"This is holy water.. it's flowed past the temples of Santheri at Hankon, Mahamai at Kadri and Ambika at Tinai ...you are blessed, your husband will be safe always."

Tears welled up in Manjul's eyes. She stepped out of the boat and set off briskly as the boatman, burnt dark by the sun, stood bare bodied holding the oar in the middle of the boat.

"Don't worry, I'll find out what's happened the elderly gentleman called out to her as he strode away.

Some fifteen or twenty days passed in this fashion. Her father-in-law was completely shattered by now. He'd sit with his head in his hands totally oblivious of everything around him except for the key hanging at his waist.

Manjul was more stable, though. She gathered every bit of strength like a plant drawing moisture from deep in the soil when everything around is scorched in the blistering heat. Gradually she began to realise that no matter what happened, she had only herself to rely upon. The elderly gentleman in the boat had told her that the Military

Head Quarters would certainly have information so that was something that gave her hope.

More than two months had passed since she had visited Shiddar and she had no news of how appa was. Her head whirled with worry about her husband and her father and then she would sit alone and burst into tears. Sometimes she thought her husband was acting stubborn and not writing letters because he wanted to punish them for something. But then the last letter which had come around Magh Punav bore no trace of bitterness. He'd written a couple of lines to his wife and asked how appa and Bayul were.

"Bappa, we haven't hoed the fields and pulled out the weeds this year. Let's get some workers. I'll supervise" she said.

"Wretched fields! Six months, and no letter from your husband and you're worried about the fields! What for?" the old man had lost interest totally.

One morning as Manjul stood in the court yard after finishing her household chores she saw two strangers walking along the edge of the fields towards their house. Once the young plants came up in the flooded fields few people ventured in this direction and their house was virtually marooned for the four or five months of the rains. Manjul's heart was in her mouth.

"Bappa..! Someone's coming ..!" she said.

Her father-in-law rushed into the court yard. "Who are you?" he called out when they were still some distance away.

"Sridhar's fine. We've got news of him. He's fine". It was the elderly man with the white moustache, the one Manjul had met in the boat.

"Why doesn't he write then?"

The men sat on a bench in the hall while her father-in-law sank into his arm chair and Manjul collapsed on the ground by the door.

"Mhalu mam, this man is a government official

working in the Soldier Board at Karwar. And you remember me, don't you, I've been trying to find out about Sridhar since that day. Wrote a strong letter to the big officials in his platoon. What is this, no news of this boy from Karwar, I wrote. Their reply came quickly enough. He committed a mistake...let's not worry about what that was...this is the military. Very strict rules! Break them slightly and you're punished. He was court martialled."

"What?"

The official from the Soldier Board was quite young.

"Let me tell you everything...no more hide and seek. Sridhar and his friend left the camp one night and went into the village. The villagers caught them and took them to the authorities. There was a trial and they were sent to jail for three months. They have lost their jobs, too."

"Where is he now?" her father-in-law asked in a hoarse voice.

"In a civil jail in Assam. Probably released by now."

The old man began to weep like a child but Manjul sat there silently as though her tears had dried up long back.

"The father has so much land...enough to keep him for the rest of his life...won't starve certainly" the elderly gentleman declared as they moved away.

Manjul filled a small pitcher of water and handed it to her father-in-law. "Don't cry Bappa. Go, wash your face" she said. The gruel in the pot had become thick and dry. She poured some hot water into it and fed her son.

Sridhar's sister Sumati hurried on to the porch the next day.

"What's happened to my brother... People are saying so many things. . . I'm sick with worry" she cried.

"Nothing's happened to him, he's fine. He's quit his job. So what? We won't starve here...why don't you come in, Vhonni?" she led the woman inside.

Sumati's eyes darted about the house and she began to sob into her sari which she held against her mouth. Bappa was lying on the bed in the hall moaning like one who had

been ill for a long time. Sumati gazed at him for a long time. Suddenly the old man said, "Who's that, Kaveri?"

Sumati rushed out into the court yard silently beseeching Manjul not to say a word.

"There are two or three good zari saris in that box, Aai's saris, did he give them to you?

" No. They're still there."

"Can you get me one? I took nothing from this house... only the clothes I was wearing when I went with him...I want to wear something that touched Aai's body..."

" But he keeps the key with him."

"All right then, I must go."

"Stay for lunch..."

"No I must go. If there's any news of Sridhar let me know...I'm worried."

She walked off briskly. Manjul was amazed at the speed at which this thin, gaunt woman always moved. She could have lived a life of comfort as the wife of a sepoy, why did she have to drag these problems on herself! Manjul wanted to ask her if she ever regretted leaving her first husband... But then she told herself she was mad! How can I ask a question that really has no answer, she thought.

If Sumati wasn't happy would she take such pains over her husband and her son? Someone said that she accompanied her husband to the quarry every morning and helped him by filling the sacks and baskets with mud. Maybe she is happy and contented then..!

As she sat there worrying about Sumati's happiness Manjul became conscious of her own predicament. She gathered her son close and sat against the wall, there was no sound from her father-in-law, either. The daughter of the house had paid a visit after such a long time yet there was nothing warm or welcoming about the atmosphere.

Devappa arrived as soon as it became dark. These days he'd wrap a blanket around himself and spend the night on their porch. Hearing no sound from within the house

he decided to peep in. Manjul sat with her son on her lap, motionless, like a figure that had been propped against the wall in some distant age. In the faint light from the oil lamp Devappa could see that no food had been cooked that day, only some gruel lay cold and congealed in the pot. He was quite irritated with Manjul but she just sat there, unmoved.

Devappa cleared the cold ashes from the hearth and arranged the firewood. He set a palm frond alight by holding it over the oil lamp and made a fire in the hearth.

Manjul could not bear it any longer, "Get up mama, I'll do that" she said as she set the pot on the fire and began to cook the meal. Devappa crossed the hall on his way to the porch. Mhalu lay there snoring loudly, cold and still like someone awaiting death.

Another month passed, they'd lived through seven months of torture by now. Manjul couldn't bear to see her father-in-law's condition, the old man hadn't set foot in the fields since he'd sowed the seeds. Manjul had lost weight and was tired too, but she remained strong. She recovered quickly from the utter confusion of the first few days and began to take care of her son and her father-in-law. She also tended the fields.

One evening when she stood by the rear door she saw a boat slicing through the water. The white sail stood out sharply amidst the shadows cast by the hills and the darkness of the stream. This boat is sailing from one end of the world to another, why will it dock at our pier, she thought.

All of a sudden the sails were furled and the naked mast stood upright like a caste mark on the forehead of the hillock. The boat had touched the pier but she couldn't see if anyone had got off, the fields and the trees and bushes

by the river blocked her view.

Manjul remained rooted to the spot. In a short while she saw a figure advancing through the fields bearing something on his shoulder. She couldn't make out who it was or whether it was a trunk or some other load that he carried on his shoulder.. The figure came closer and Manjul sprinted towards him. She took the trunk from him and plied him with questions,

"Why didn't you write? So what if you lost your job, don't you have a wife and child? Your father is laid low... I've been sick with worry. What were we to think?"

He didn't say a word, merely followed her to the house and sat down on the porch.

"Bappa, your son has come," she cried.

Bappa woke up with a start and staggered to his feet. He lurched out to the porch and took one look at his son. It was as though someone had poured cold water over him, as though a huge mountain of depression loomed over him as love and anger flitted across his face. His son was pale and gaunt, a stranger sitting like a beggar in his own house.

The old man collapsed into his chair.

"Just our fate, can't show our faces in the village. If we do such things ourselves, who can be blamed?" he muttered to himself. "Arrey, say something" he screeched as Sridhar remained silent.

Manjul brought the child and placed it on her husband's lap, but he made no attempt to talk to it and soon the boy wriggled out of his grasp.

"Bappa, you were desperate to see your son all these days. Now that he's come why do you rant like this?"

Manjul stared at her husband trying to read something in the way he behaved. She had been walking on air from the moment he got home, what mattered to her was that he was back safe and sound. She wasn't bothered about how he arrived or why he was so thin, in any case he'd never been fat! Just a few days of eating regular

wholesome meals and the flesh would be back on his body!

She lighted the fire under the big cauldron in the bathroom and when the water was hot she led him in. She took off his soiled clothes and pouring hot water over his body scrubbed him clean. She rubbed his head dry with the end of her sari and then handed him a towel.

Her father-in-law picked up his bedding and went upstairs after dinner. The old man would often sleep there after a fight or when something happened that was not quite to his liking.

"Told him so many times to control himself but would he listen!

And now this disaster!" he muttered to himself.

Manjul could bear it no longer.

"You won't get his salary any more, that's why you're angry! you're selfish, that's what you are! Said I'd go with him but you didn't let me. Now make your son and your daughter-in-law wallow in those fields! Sat and cried all these days...now you're showing your horns again!"

This was the first time since she was married that she'd dared to criticize her father-in-law like this and the old man was really incensed.

"Wretched creature! Rattling away...you'll have to eat mud one of these days. Your evil foot prints have brought this disaster on us..." He grumbled loudly for a while before suddenly lapsing into silence.

Manjul laid the bedding and led Sridhar there to lie beside his son.

"Why don't you speak? What's playing on your mind?"

He remained silent.

"Tell me what happened."

"....."

"I won't let you rest without telling me, keep you awake all night.'

She snuggled up to him and took him in her arms. Then Sridhar also wrapped his arms about her.

"So, tell me."

"What is there to tell?"

"Whatever. Tell me."

Sridhar remained silent again. For a moment he was tempted to unburden his heart to his wife, to lighten the load on his mind, to say...

They were distributing rum, that day.

There wasn't enough for all of us so my friend Avtari and I crept out of the camp and went to a nearby village where someone sold liquor. We entered the wrong house by mistake... there were some women in there... they screamed. People came running. We tried to explain but they couldn't understand our language, we couldn't understand theirs. They beat us very badly, our bodies were swollen.....then they dragged us to the guard in the camp. They locked us up, there was an investigation and then the court martial. Do you know what that is? The military court declares the punishment. They tie you up, put shackles on your feet and make you run past the barracks and through the parade ground. They take off your military uniform and hand you over to the civil police. You serve the sentence in the civil jail.....

"What are you thinking about? Tell me..."

"....."

"The man from the Soldier Board came here. He said, for three months you were..."

"Not three. They released us after two months."

"Where were you all this time, then?"

"In Mumbai, for two months. Almost got a job there, didn't want to come back to the village."

"But you did."

"Yes, kept thinking of you all the time. Almost threw myself before a train. But you appeared before my eyes."

Manjul crept close to him and wept with her head on his chest. After a long while her sobs ceased.

"Sleep now. You must be tired after the journey" she said.

"I still feel like committing suicide. Don't rely on me too much Manjul..."

"Then why leave us here? Let's all go and jump into the Kali river, I'll push my son in and then jump in with you."

Everything was quiet and peaceful after that, even her father-in-law stopped moaning in his sleep. Only the faint calls of the fishermen laying out their nets and the swishing of the palm fronds could be heard.

"Did you go after those women in the village?" Manjul suddenly asked, the words rushing out as though a dam had burst.

"No, no! That's rubbish! Who told you that?" he screeched.

" No, one. I just asked. Just something carried in the wind. Even the man from the Soldier Board didn't know what had happened."

Sridhar was almost in tears.

"Just my bad luck. Even the wind sprouts teeth..."

"Don't take it to heart like this, but tell me one thing. Why did you go to that village?'

"To drink. My friend and I went to buy drink."

Manjul didn't know what to say. Now this was even worse, he was talking about his drinking quite openly. In a little while he fell asleep and the child also slept soundly beside him. Only Manjul lay there wide eyed, wishing she could go and end her life in the Kali river!

He sat quietly in the house all the next day. Manjul placed the child in his arms again and again but he showed not the slightest interest .Two of his friends and his uncle Raghnath dropped in that morning. No one asked him anything nor did he say anything to them. His friend Ramdas who normally came into the kitchen to talk to her and to demand tea also sat there silently. Only his uncle remarked as they were ready to leave,

"Very strict, these army officials. You can't get past them, even we were there, once."

As dusk fell, however, he pulled on his shirt and set off across the fields. Manjul hung the lantern on the hook so that the light fell on the gate and sat there waiting for him.

"Bappa, go see where he's gone" she pleaded as it became late but the old man only said that he was not a child and that he knew his way home.

It was very late when he got back. His face and eyes were red and he lurched unsteadily with every step.

"You've been drinking!" Manjul accused.

"Yes. Think I'm scared of you? I'm not scared of anyone. Don't care for anyone! Bappa! You're angry because my money order won't come any more ...sent you seventeen thousand in these seven years. Now I want that back. I'll set up a shop. I'll set up a factory. Teach everyone a lesson!"

Manjul dragged him into the house and soon he began to weep. He fell face down on the bed, his feet smeared with the mud from the fields. Soon he was asleep. Manjul didn't serve dinner, she just sat there by his side. Her father-in-law went into the kitchen, drank a glass of water and went to bed.

This began to happen every day. Sridhar would sit quietly, like a deity all day and in the evening he'd turn into a demon when he was drunk. Father and son would quarrel bitterly and Manjul would suffer in silence.

"The fields are white with weeds like an old woman's hair and everyone just sits at home rocking the cradle!"

The old man tossed his blanket on to his shoulder and set off briskly. Manjul finished her chores quickly, left her son with their neighbour Parvatiakki and said to her husband,

"Come . Let's go to the fields."

He didn't say a word, just threw his towel over his shoulder and followed her to the field. They uprooted the weeds all morning and Manjul was quite pleased. Everything seemed to be falling in place. When they were returning after lunch Sridhar said "I must go to the shop."

"What for?"

"Nothing much. I must go..."

He came back drunk. All Manjul's hopes and aspirations were dashed to pieces that afternoon.

"Gokul mavshi, Bai has sent word asking me to come for the jatra on the Shigmo full moon night."

"Go my child. Where else will you go? One uncle, and he doesn't even bother to take you home."

"No mavshi. Mama keeps asking me to come but I won't leave appa alone. And he's got his own problems. Five daughters! How will he ever get them married with just this income from the fields!"

"But will you go to Manjul's house?"

"The problem lies with appa's meals ...that's what I've come to talk to you about."

"Don't worry about a thing. I'll take the food to him."

"I'll give you the rice..."

Khushali anna's voice came from inside the house,

"Give us the rice, she says! He may be your father but he's our cousin, too, don't you know that?"

Suman was always scared of Khushali anna. Tall and broad with a big square face the ground seemed to quake as he was quick to use his fists. He would fight with his neighbours over the borders of his fields at least once every year but when he was in a good mood he'd even pluck out his heart if it could be of use to anyone!

They performed a Kannada play at the temple on Chaitra Punav every year and how well he danced in it ! He wore nothing but a loin cloth all the year round but when he donned those rich zari edged clothes and when his face was painted for the play he looked handsome, a real king amongst kings!

Suman stood there with a small face, sorry to have offended Khushali with her words. Gokul mavshi drew her close,

"Heard that your Bhavoji is sitting at home for the last five or six months. Isn't he going back?" she asked.

"I don't know, Mavshi. Bai doesn't say anything."

"She'll never complain, that one! Not even if you cut her up. You'll know she's hurt only when you see the blood."

"Bai seems to be in trouble, these days."

"The wretched fellow was lying dead drunk on the road in Hulgey that day," Khushali's vice wafted out of the house. Suman crept away wiping the tears from her eyes.

"Yes, you go to Hulgey at once. At least we'll get word of how Manjul is" Gokul mavshi said.

Manjul's husband had written a few letters to them soon after the marriage and those letters were stuck on a wire hanging from a peg. They were dark with soot now, and the sheet Manjul had laid out on his bed when he visited them was now just a rag.

"Bayul, be careful with this pitcher" Bai had said one day as she scrubbed the brass vessel till it shone. "If your husband drinks the water you offer in this he'll be your's for life!"

Bai must have been mad to believe that ! Suman wanted to throw the pitcher away, to dent it at least. She opened the trunk and drew out a new dress. Bhavoji had brought the cloth for her when he came home on leave some time back, and she had rushed to the tailor at kodibag to get it stitched. She liked the colour very much. She'd wear it when she went to the temple festival at Hulgey the next day, must ask Bhavoji why he's behaving like this, must tell him not to trouble Bai so!

Appa was talking a lot of disjointed gibberish when she was ready to leave the next morning. "Tell Bai to cross the river before it gets too dry. It'll be too late by the time she gets to the Ghangre rock," he muttered. But at least he did his work all right, he would bathe and eat and take the cattle out to graze or wander about the edges of the fields. Only the words he spoke made no sense most of the time.

Suman's eyes flitted about looking for Govind, where was he now, she wanted to ask him how she looked. Actually, Bai hadn't invited her for the jatra in their village. She hadn't seen Bai for all of four months and when she heard that it was time for the temple festival in Hulgey she had decided to go.

There were two small islands, Ambe juvo and Khargey juvo, in the river just off Shiddar village so there was no direct boat that could take her to the other bank. She would have to walk to Kinnar village on this side or to Khargey village on that side of Shiddar to take the boat. The three villages stood in a row and it didn't take more than an hour to get across. Suman walked briskly towards the boat at Khargey for Bai's village Hulgey stood on the opposite bank and Bai's house was just by the river.

Govind suddenly came up to her in the middle of the field.

"Arrey Govind, what are you doing here?'

"Waiting to see you. To see how you look all dressed up."

"Not like this...hiding from everyone..."

"The people in the vaddo get suspicious otherwise. Say all sorts of things."

"Are you scared?"

"No... but..."

Love, anger and pity for the boy jostled in Suman's heart.

"Don't be scared, Govind. Let's meet and talk like we used to since we were children. Let people talk. I've suffered so much this year because you don't come...."

"Yes. I get upset too. Then I have to come like this... stealthily...to see you."

She moved off a few paces. Then, "How do I look, Govind?" she asked.

"Very pretty! That's why I came ... To see you."

A dark, stout woman sat in the boat. The flesh of her stomach and waist spilled in oily folds, on to her clothes.

Her hair was pulled back into a knot with a big hibiscus tucked into it and a big smear of kumkum adorned her forehead. Suman felt that she had seen the woman somewhere.

"Whose house are you going to?"

"To my sister's. She's married to someone in Hulgey."

"To whom?"

"Bhavoji's name is Sridhar."

"Is that Mhalu mam's Sridhar..." Who knows what's wrong with these men in Hulgey..." the woman exclaimed in her loud hoarse voice.

"Gulabi, you worry about your man, forget about the others. Poke your nose into everything that happens from Hankon village on one side to Canacona on the other! They've raised the flag on the temple chariot over there and everything is ready and you're still sitting here!"

"What do I have to do there? Break the coconut before the chariot so that it can start, or dance in the procession like a kalavant?"

"But you belong to the village...you have duties at the festival, don't you?"

"What duties? They gave us temple land, fields that yielded fifteen kudavs of paddy because we were traditional temple cooks...but then that Balsu grabbed that too..."

"You shouldn't have let him."

"What could I do? When my man became a drunkard I gave it to Balsu to till. Did so for three years, gave me my share, too. Then in the fourth year he told the Tribunal it was his own land...but I tell you Pandu, it won't do him any good. His family will be destroyed...the land will turn into a wilderness ..... It's god's land.... Mahadev will never forgive him!"

"Where's your basket of fish today?"

"I've stopped all that. Went to collect what people owe me, today. See, I've got some seven kudavs of paddy here."

"Stopped selling fish after so many years?"

" My son says 'I work in an office in Panaji and here you carry that basket of dried shrimps and shell fish all over the place!' I'm sick of going again and again to collect my dues...people take the fish but they don't pay ...and then they give me inferior paddy, too! I tell you Pandu, the people of these seven or eight villages owe me a lot of money."

"Stopped selling fish. Now how will you give your husband money to buy drink?

"Let him go and die somewhere. I'm fed up!"

"You smear so much kumkum on your forehead and wear flowers in your hair because he's alive. Yet you don't care if he dies?"

"That's right. The kumkum and the flowers. That's just why I tolerated him all these years."

Suman was sick of the woman's conversation so when the boat neared the bank she stepped into knee deep water and waded ashore. The sun had risen quite high by the time she reached Bai's house and it was getting quite warm. There was no air of festivity about the house, a pot lay upturned under a palm and the courtyard was full of rubbish. She could hear the sound of something being pounded just beyond the bushes in the garden.

Manjul was blowing into the fire in the hearth. She whirled around when Suman called her name, her face wreathed in smiles. Bai's clothes were soiled and her hair was a mess with all the soot and ashes that had blown out of the hearth. Somehow, Bai's smiling face didn't seem to match with the squalor and air of melancholy that seemed to pervade the house.

"Come, sit child. Wanted to invite you to the festival but no one was going to Shiddar so..."

"Never mind. Couldn't hold myself back. I've been coming to this festival every year since you got married,

haven't I? But what's this, Bai, why are you wrapped in these soiled clothes on this festive occasion?"

A shadow seemed to pass over Manjul's face.

"I'm not feeling well .... not interested in anything."

"Why? What's wrong?"

"Nothing. Sit down. Let me finish cooking. I ground the batter for udad polis last night. Will ask my father-in-law to pluck a few nirpanas from the tree in the garden ..... let's make a fine shaak. I've soaked some moong. We'll have polis, shaak, khathkhathey and payas today."

"Where's the little fellow?"

"Devappa mam took him away just now. Must be with him."

"And Bhavoji?"

"By the temple perhaps."

"Is Bhavoji all right?"

"Ofcourse. Why should anything be wrong with him?"

"Then why are you so cranky?"

"Who says I'm cranky?" Manjul began to laugh. "Now that you've come let's get into a festive mood."

The sisters set to work in earnest. Suman changed into an old dress that she had brought along and swept the whole house and court yard clean. She sprinkled a mixture of dung and water and etched a fine design on the threshold.

"Bai, where's that torana you stitched out of scraps of cloth? We should put it up on this festive occasion."

'Let's not bother about that..."

"No, no! I'll put it up."

Manjul pulled out the torana from the bottom of a trunk and Suman hung the strip of cloth covered with colourful flowers and vines over the front door. She took the pot and pitcher and went to draw water from the well.

Bai's father-in-law was pounding the rotten coconut husks to extract coir. His body was covered with filth and a foul smell hung in the air. What sort of wretched work

is this man up to on such a festive day, she thought disgustedly.

When they finished the house hold chores Suman sat down to comb Manjul's hair. They heard the sound of someone bustling about in the bath room.

"My father-in-law's gone to take a bath. He'll offer puja to the tulsi now..."

"But Bai, Bhavoji isn't here yet!"

He'll come. Where else can he go, anyway?" Manjul tried to sound casual and disinterested but her eyes were trained on the path that led to the temple.

When Manjul's father-in-law emerged from his bath she asked him to fetch some plantain leaves for the rituals. She served a small portion of everything that had been cooked on three leaves, one would be offered to the tulsi, one to the cows and the third would be placed in the open for the crows to feast upon.

"Long as I'm alive I'll offer food and drink to my dead ancestors on special days so that they can rest in peace. But when I die my spirit will remain restless..... this son of mine will pour nothing down my throat! Not even a mouthful of water ...not when I'm alive ...nor after my death! The old man ranted as Suman stood there ill at ease.

He prepared sandal paste and gathered a few flowers and after sprinkling water over one plantain leaf he placed it before the cows. He placed the other leaf before the tulsi and began to worship the figures of Ganapati and Lakshmi engraved on the pedestal.

"Ram, Ram, Ram, Ram...Hari Om ....Hari Om..." He mumbled.

Suddenly a dog came up and began to sniff at the leaf. The old man sprang up and chased the animal away before returning to his puja, much to Suman's amusement.

After a while Devappa mam arrived with the child in his arms. The boy was clutching a balloon and his face was smeared with food.

"Did you take him to the jatra, Devappa mam? Is there a big crowd by the temple?"

Devappa merely smiled and nodded his head. Manjul could understand the sounds he made and she could carry on a conversation with him. But when she asked whether he had seen Sridhar there Devappa pretended not to understand and departed in a hurry promising to come back later for the festive meal.

Suman played with Ramesh and the child chortled with glee. The house resounded with their laughter and for the first time Manjul began to feel that this was a festive occasion indeed. It was getting late in the afternoon but her husband hadn't arrived so Manjul asked her father-in-law to eat.

"Let him come, first. Or I'll fast... Even though it's a festival!" the old man exclaimed. He began to climb the stairs slowly and Manjul noted how his body had shrunk, how his skin hung in folds.

"Suman, you eat. Feed the child, too."

"No Bai. None of the elders have eaten yet...."

"You are our guest. You must eat first. If you eat, I will feel that a suvashin has been served... That the rituals are complete. So eat."

Manjul sat before Suman as she ate. "Why don't you eat well? You like moong shaak don't you?" she said heaping more food on to her plate.

Suddenly there was a commotion in the field just beyond the house. Manjul rushed out, Suman washed her hands and ran after her. They saw Sridhar lurching towards the house talking to himself in a loud voice. He was clutching two or three packets wrapped in a filthy rag and apiece of string threaded through the nostrils of a big fish.

"Gulabi said to me, 'Your sister-in-law has come! Grab a fish!' Then I brought these sweets and these savouries ... That big Shet from Hulgey was after this fish. But I paid double ...! So, Suman! Won't you talk to your Bhavoji ...?

Six months since I came back and you didn't come to see me even once!"

Suman stood there staring at him, aghast.

"But you could have come to see us at shiddar, Bhavo-ji."

"I'm only a worthless loafer ... Threw up my job to come and sit at home ... and here, Kaveri-Manjul! Make a nice spicy humman with this fish ... It should taste like meat!"

Manjul glared at him angrily.

"Drunk out of his senses. Can't walk two steps ... and goes to buy fish! What for? Whose dead body are you going to throw it upon?" She grabbed the fish from his hands and tossed it into the court yard.

The man was almost insane with rage. He rushed towards his wife screeching angrily and Suman threw herself in between but Manjul pushed her aside.

"Don't worry. He won't dare touch me" she said.

Sridhar lurched into the house and collapsed in a drunken stupor. Manjul spread a reed mat beside him and hauled him on to it. She'd never been so depressed in her whole life. Filled with hopelessness and disgust she wanted to kill herself. She sat there silently beside her son, not daring to look at the sleeping child.

Suman, meanwhile, picked up the fish and washed it thoroughly. She cut it into pieces and began to get the curry ready. Manjul, however, sat in silence paying no heed to anything that she said.

It was really late, now.

"Bai, your father-in-law hasn't eaten yet. Shouldn't you serve him?"

"Bayul, remember the Great Flood? Such a flood will come now ... this house, and everyone in it will be washed away ....!"

Suman stood there motionless, her heart quaking at these words. Then Manjul said,

"He's performed the rituals to keep our ancestors at

peace ... He mustn't remain hungry himself. Fill a plate with food and take a pitcher of water to him ..."

The old man was lying on his bed with his eyes shut. He stirred when he heard her foot steps.

"Mama, eat" she said.

"Both of you, Ganesh's daughters, are good girls. But who can change one's fate?" he muttered as she turned away.

When Suman came downstairs Sridhar was sitting on the mat retching violently. He collapsed on the ground again and the smell of stale drink and vomit spread through the house. Suman didn't know what to do. She stood by the back door unable to bear the foul smell. Then she cleaned the mess with a rag and threw it into the pit by the coconut palm. She wiped Bhavoji's face with a fresh cloth and ran a moist rag smeared with dung over the soiled spot.

"Bai, come and eat something" she said. But Manjul merely spread the end of her sari beneath her body and lay on the floor.

It was getting dark now and Suman was drowsy, too. She spread a mat beside her sister and lay down. It was well into the night when she heard Bhavoji calling her sister. Manjul didn't respond for quite some time.

"The effect of the drink has gone. He's hungry I suppose" she muttered to herself. Then, in a loud tone, "Why? Isn't your stomach full with all that you've drunk? The poor child has come after all this time ...and she's had to clean up your vomit!"

"Get up, now. Give me food. Let her eat, too."

"She won't eat. Nor will I. But you eat if you want." Manjul was furious.

"Then I won't eat, too" he said.

Finally Manjul gave him a pitcher of water and he washed his face at the back door. She woke Suman, too, and ladled food into their plates. She went to the foot of the stairs and called out,

"Bappa! Are you awake?"

"How can I sleep any more? The devil has robbed my sleep."

"Come and eat."

"I ate late in the afternoon ... The food is still stuck in my throat..."

Manjul sat beside them and they began to eat.

"The humman is very tasty" Sridhar remarked.

Manjul glanced at her sister but the girl's mind was not on the food. Tears streamed endlessly down her cheeks. Manjul turned the lamp so that the light did not fall on her face. "Why do you cry, Bayul? These tears have fallen to my lot ... Why should you cry! Or is it for me that you weep....? Weep then ... Shed a few tears for your Bai!"

By the time they went to bed they could hear people's shouts, the sound of music and the noise of fire works in the clearing by the temple. The Lord's palki must have emerged from the temple, they said to themselves. Manjul lay there wide eyed long after everyone else fell asleep. A huge weight seemed to press on her heart. She felt helpless as though she was falling into a deep bottomless well.

Bhavoji was silent and withdrawn the next morning as he shaved, bathed and washed his clothes. Suman felt she ought to say something to him, perhaps ask him to come to Shiddar along with Bai. But he was so silent and aloof. Bhavoji, why don't you talk and joke like you used to, say something ... Crack jokes about my name ... It will make Bai feel better too!

"Manjul, I'm going ahead. You come to the jatra with Suman," he said,

"Why don't we go together?"

"Yes, Bhavoji. Let's go together!"

"No. I'm going now."

He pulled out a ten rupee note from his pocket and held it out to Suman.

"Here. Buy what you want at the jatra," he said.

Suman was hesitant but she accepted the money when

Manjul urged her to. Manjul was full of misgiving. Shouldn't have let him go by himself! No I don't feel like going to the jatra she said, again and again.

Manjul knotted Suman's hair into a bun and tucked a wreath of abole and moti mogra flowers into it. She dressed her in one of her own saris, put kajal in her eyes and powder on her face and gave her gold ornaments for her neck and her wrists.

"Bayul, how pretty you look! Like a goddess! No wonder that Govind is mad about you ...!" She beamed, drawing the girl into her arms.

"Bai, you're getting me dressed ...and look at you!"

"What difference does it make, anything will do for me now ..."

Manjul reached for the nine yard sari that hung from the peg but Suman snatched it from her hands.

"Bai, wear a five yard sari, like mine."

"I don't have any more ..."

"That's not true! Bhavoji used to bring only five yard saris for you in the old days. Wear the abole coloured one you wore when you came to Shiddar that time ..."

"But my father-in-law is sitting there keeping watch. He doesn't like all this. He forced me to wear nine yard saris ..."

"Why do you bother about him? I would have put him in his place long ago! He won't say anything. He was praising you yesterday ..."

"That's what he does, always. Praises you, first. Then throws you down."

She rummaged in the bottom of the trunk and drew out the pale orange sari.

"I've never worn a five yard sari in this place. Only wore once when I went to Shiddar," she confessed nervously. Suman tucked the rest of the flowers into her sister's hair.

"Do you know what the women of our vaddo always say? Suman may be fair but she doesn't have Manjul's

beauty ... What they say is true!" she exclaimed.

As they set off for the temple Manjul's father-in-law picked up his spade and set of in the opposite direction.

"Vaini ...! Vaini!"

A young man was running towards them.

"Here he comes now ... Prabhakar. Lives in the next house. Says, Vaini, I want to marry your sister. Keeps hanging around me ...!"

"What does he do?"

"Nothing. One brother works in the police force in Goa. Another is in Mumbai. Says the villagers will give him a job in the new school."

"Has he studied a lot?"

"Fourth class ... Or maybe the fifth one."

"Then what job will he get in the school? Maybe he'll ring the bell!"

The youth came running up to them, he was tall and dark and very thin. His hair was combed high above his forehead and the oil he had applied on it was oozing on his face. His trousers were so short that they could see a fair expanse of his bright red socks above his dirty shoes.

"His brothers must be very short ... See how short his pants are."

Suman whispered to Manjul.

"Yes. This is the only tall one in the family. The others are like stunted palms."

"Don't tall people look nice, Vaini?"

"Ofcourse! You look like one of those painted actors ..."

"I can see that she's your sister ... Vaini."

"The whole world can see a girl who isn't married!"

"The other day Aai was telling Bappa to sow more raw rice in the fields We'll need that for Bayul's wedding, she was saying!"

"Tell him to roast the rice on a griddle first" Suman said loud enough for him to hear.

"Vaini, she's laughing at me!"

"Never mind. The more you laugh the more your stomach gets filled. You don't feel hungry, then."

"Is that good?"

"Ofcourse! You don't have to work to fill your stomach."

By the time they reached the temple Prabhakar saw someone he knew and loped off to join him.

"Bai, has he promised to give you a zari edged sari at his wedding?" Suman giggled.

"An expensive sari indeed! That fellow's parents are such stingy people they don't cook for days. Just heat up stale food at meal time!"

They walked on in silence.

"So, what does Govind say?"

"What can he say?"

"Does he come home these days?"

"He's a coward. Scared of the women in the vaddo."

"How long will he be scared? Isn't Bhaskar anna going to adopt him?"

"That's why he's brought him here."

"Does he say anything about getting married?"

"What will he say?"

"I'll tell you one thing, Bayul. Love is all very nice. But don't let him come near you before you get married. Control yourself."

Suman turned on her angrily.

"I trust you completely, Bayul, but who knows what will happen in the future? We must be careful. Our minds are like sparks of fire, we must control ourselves."

They had reached the temple by now and were besieged by crowds of people who had come to join the festivities from Bhairey and Kerwadi, Halgey and Hulgey, Khargey and Shiddar and other neighbouring villages.

"We'll see the deity later, when the crowd gets thinner. Let's walk around the fair a bit" Manjul said to Suman.

The chariot which had been dragged across the clearing through the night and into the early hours of the

morning now stood on one side with its flags fluttering in the breeze. The curtain was drawn across the stage and the matov where the people had sat to watch the play was empty now.

"Must have been a good play..."

"If he had been all right I'd have come with Bayul to watch it last night" Manjul said to herself.

The musicians were playing in the temple while little children blew on their pipes and whistles outside. People were talking at the top of their voices. A group of young men sang and danced as they moved past in a procession and people shoved each other as they hastened out of their path. Young girls shrank into themselves in alarm but their eyes were trained on the young men who were dancing past.

The *divajkannis* who had carried the oil lamps in a procession had finished offering their service to the Lord and were now huddled in the shade of a tree eating plantains and drinking sherbet as they broke the strict fast they had observed for one and a half days. They wore new saris, and had loads of flowers in their hair. With their foreheads smeared with kumkum and the heavy gold chains aground their necks they looked like goddesses themselves that had been worshipped.

Suman bought a rattle for Ramesh and the child waved it in glee. Suddenly they heard raised voices, it was not clear whether people were cursing and fighting with each other or merely conversing in loud tones. Manjul's heart was quaking,

"Suman, hold me" she said.

"What's wrong, Bai?"

They pressed forward till they could hear all that was being said and see what was happening.

Sridhar, who was totally drunk, was picking fights with those around him. People were shoving him about and taunting him and he was responding with more curses.

"What's happening Suman .... who's screaming like this ...who are they beating ... have the gods turned to stone?"

Manjul felt that the earth would open up and swallow her in a moment, that all her shame and sorrow would come to an end. Suman held Ramesh in one arm and wound the other protectively around her sister.

People from so many villages have gathered here today, many of them know us well, and he has chosen a time like this to throw all shame to the winds! That's Shanker Devli, from the Devul vaddo at Shiddar ... poor Bai, she's such a mild tender-hearted woman .... why did you have to become his wife, Bai, why couldn't you have remained as my sister, more than a mother to me?

"Suman, let's go."

"Yes, Bai."

They moved away from the scene and sat down beneath an Ovli tree. The noisy crowd soon dispersed and they were relieved when the commotion died down. Manjul was soaked in sweat and her body was trembling uncontrollably. Suman wiped her face with the end of her sari.

"Bai, shall we go to see the Lord?"

"No."

"Bai, wait here a minute ..."

Suman rushed towards the temple almost tripping over her sari which she held bunched up in one hand. She bought a balloon for the child.

"Why get him anything ... Star crossed creature that he is ...!"

"Don't talk like that!" Suman protested.

They turned back. Manjul had no energy left, everything seemed to turn dark before her eyes. The temple, the chariot, and everything else in the clearing seemed to be engulfed in a dark cloud. There would be no more festivity on this hill, the gods had lost their divinity, she thought.

"And you've come to enjoy the jatra! I didn't invite

you, yet you came. Now see how things are here!" She turned to Suman angrily.

The girl didn't say a word. Her face had turned dark, as though it was under a cloud. She seemed ready to burst into tears, her fair face had turned dark and overcast all of a sudden. Manjul didn't say any more, either. Suffer a little for me, Bayul, be a partner in my sorrow her heart cried.

Her father-in-law was stretched out on the porch when they got home.

"Look at the wretched creature ... lying across the threshold at the height of noon!"

"Arrey Ramesh, back from the jatra already? Did you get your ajja something to eat?" he asked the child.

"Did the ajja give the grandchild even an anna to spend at the jatra?" Manjul snapped at the old man.

His lower lip seemed to tremble for a few moments.

"Why do you say that, Kaveri? Everything I have belongs to him, doesn't it?"

"And what do you have? Fields that will rot as soon as the river overflows its banks. And this pile of stone, this house! That too if his father doesn't sell it off to buy drinks!"

The old man tossed his blanket aside and got to his feet.

Suman thought that he would retaliate but he merely turned away.

"When the scaffolding of the house turns rotten even the rags in the kitchen sprout teeth!" He muttered striding towards the river as if he were going to jump in.

Someone screamed loudly in one of the houses that night. Who was it who screamed as though her heart was being rent apart? Suman awoke with a start. Ganesh was sleeping with his blanket drawn over his head. Suddenly she heard soft foot steps creeping up to their door. Someone knocked. A soft voice called,"

"Whot's that?"

Suman peered out with the lamp in her hand. Shobha stood there dripping with sweat even though the night was cold. Her teeth were chattering as she rushed in and collapsed on Suman's bed.

"What's the matter, Shobha vaini? Suman asked as the woman drew deep breaths and wiped her face on her sari.

Shobha had withered away since her husband's death, like camphor that vanished into the air when it is burnt. She had forgotten how to smile. But the lush hair on her head, her childlike innocence and the brightness of her eyes remained the same.

"What's happened, Shobha vaini?" Suman asked, again.

The woman began to sob.

"I've always been scared of him. Gave him everything my husband left. I just sign the receipt when the pension comes and give it all to my mother-in-law ... Then he snatches it from her. Now he's turned to me ... Isn't a father-in-law supposed to be like a father.....?"

"What!" Suman's heart began to quake.

"Wouldn't let me bathe or change in peace ... would stare like a crow. Would come near me with all sorts of excuses ... the sinner! But I would stick to my mother-in-law, go to the fields and come back with her, so he'd get angry! Yesterday she went to Majale, her cousin is dead. So he thought he'd take a chance! At first I didn't know what was happening ... it was so dark ... but then ... I'm like a daughter to him!"

Suman was listening in amazement, she couldn't believe things like this were true.

"My husband used to say he'd take me with him when he came on leave, next. Now I'll go join him at the cremation ground! I'm sick of this life, Suman."

Suman brought her a pitcher of water to wash her swollen face but she drank most of it and settled down on the mattress. "Don't tell anyone I'm here" she whispered.

Suman lay on a quilt beside her, yearning to comfort her like one does a small child. She looked like a white water lily that had fallen on the road, which would soon be crushed by a demon's foot. The tears had dried on Shobha vaini's cheeks, her eyes had shrunk into their hollows and her bare forehead and neck were a pitiful sight indeed. Suman quickly put out the lamp but she sensed that shobha was weeping throughout the night. She didn't dare put her hand out to touch Shobha's cheeks, those tears must be as hot as fire, they must bear the smell of blood, she thought.

Suman didn't know when Shobha let herself out of the house but Avdu ajji's rooster began to crow soon after that. Its loud cries rent the air and made the whole atmosphere tremble.

Wretched creature! Why was it screaming like that!

Avdu ajji's rooster looked like a demon and it had a voice to match. The feathers around its neck were dark, as though a blanket had been wrapped around it but the feathers on its wings were red. It would roam all over the vaddo rushing around in circles, throwing its neck back as it crowed furiously from time to time.

"Avdu ajji why do you let this huge cock wander like this?" people asked.

"I made a vow. It will be sacrificed before the image of the Betal during the festival" the old woman always replied.

Suman wondered where Shobha vaini could have gone so early in the morning. Her father-in-law Soyru was creeping around the vaddo idly as though looking for someone.

"Thought I heard someone scream in your house last night" Ambu mavshi said to him.

"Yes. Our cat jumped on to our daughter-in-law in the dark... Lucky she didn't get hurt", he said.

Suman was beside herself with fright, where had this

Shobha vaini gone? She wasn't in her house but a black cat was sitting among the creepers that climbed all over the roof. A large gourd hung from the plant. Suman felt it would fall to the ground and its flesh and seeds would scatter all over the threshold.

Shobha's mother-in-law Parvati mavshi returned that afternoon. Shobha was nowhere to be seen and the fire in the hearth had not been lighted since morning.

"How do I know where she is... You go to Majale, she must have gone somewhere else! Hang about the roads, both of you..." her husband screeched.

Parvati began to call out to her daughter-in-law but there was no response. Gradually her voice took on a frantic note. It was only then that people began to show concern .They came out of their houses and everyone set about looking for Shobha. At first they went from house to house to see if she was hiding somewhere, to check if anyone had seen her that day. Suman went with them but she didn't tell anyone that shobha had spent the night at their house.

The loud scream in the night, and now Shobha was gone. Worry and suspicion seemed to cloud everyone's brow. They fanned out of the vaddo and began to look amongst the trees and bushes, to peer into every tank and well.

"If the girl has killed herself I won't let these people go! Will drag them in handcuffs all the way to Karwar!" Sadashiv raged.

Suddenly one of the youngsters, Manu, began to scream "Come here! Everyone ...Come here!"

All the men and women of the vaddo rushed towards the well by the river. Shobha's body was floating on the water like a lily that had been tossed in. Her white sari and her hair floated on the surface, her arms were outstretched as though to embrace someone.

Parvati threw herself on Shobha's corpse and sobbed uncontrollably, even more than she had wept when her

son had died. The whole vaddo was plunged into a world of sorrow.

Suman was filled with thoughts of Bai, she wanted to call out to her across the river, to plunge into the water and swim across to her side.

'See what Shobha vaini has done, Bai? Don't let your sorrows force you to do anything like that..!' she wanted to say.

The river seemed to hide in the surrounding darkness like a serpent hides, coiled up within its basket. The smell of salt and rotten vegetation hung heavy in the air. Everything was so still, even the calls of the fishermen and the boatmen seemed to have died down.

It was well into the night but Sridhar had not got home yet. Manjul sat waiting for him with a lantern by her side, her ears perking up when the cattle in the shed knocked their horns against each other. She heard voices approaching and saw three men carrying Sridhar in their arms.

"What happened?" She hurried forward.

"He's drunk. Was sprawled in the field by the tamarind tree" one of them said as they laid him down on the reed mat and turned away.

He'd been drinking all these months but he'd never fallen on the roadside before. Manjul was embarrassed. One of the men was Shaba master whose wife was from Shiddar. Manjul knew him well, she addressed him as Bhavoji and he always stopped to chat with her whenever they met.

Sridhar lay in bed with his head covered the next day. Manjul woke him up and forced him to eat his meals but he didn't say a word to her. He seemed lost in some deep thought.

"I don't want to stay in this village any more" he said when they had finished dinner that night, but Manjul didn't pay any attention. He'd said this so many times in the past.

Manjul awoke at daybreak as usual. Her husband was sleeping in the hall. He didn't snore generally but he made a soft gurgling sound in his throat when he was fast asleep. Manjul listened intently but she could hear no sound. She lit a lamp and went outside but he was nowhere to be seen. The reed mat lay on the floor but the bedsheet and blanket were gone.

"Where are you?" she called, rushing to the front door which stood ajar, but there was no response.

The smallest of the three trunks that stood on top of the other in the middle room, was gone. So were his clothes from the peg in the wall. This man has taken the night boat and gone far away, she thought, frightened out of her wits. She woke her father-in-law and sent him to the pier to check.

The old man rushed out without even pausing to draw on a shirt. However, the boat, taking advantage of the low tide and the early morning wind had passed Hulgey a long time ago, it was closer to Kinnar now, he was told. Two or three men stood on the pier.

'Shiva, did you see my son get on the boat?" he asked.

"I saw him on Babajaan's boat, had a trunk in his hand. The boat came early today, carried swiftly on the low tide."

Bappa returned home and squatted on the floor, tired and broken.

"He went on the boat, god knows to which distant land. We'll have to sit here and suffer Kaveri..!"

Her father-in-law's fair complexion had turned dark and sallow and the skin on his face hung loose. His eyes were red and swollen as though he had been crying. Yet the old man kept himself busy with one job after another, forcing himself to work though he was often ready to drop with the effort.

Manjul, however, lost all interest in life. She neither cooked nor cleaned nor bothered about any household chores, merely standing by the rear door with her eyes

trained on the Kali river flowing into the distance. When either of them felt hungry they would dip into the pot of gruel that she cooked in the morning.

There was a young girl called Surekha who lived in one of the neighbouring houses. Her father worked in the Forest Department so she stayed with her grand parents and attended school in the village. This girl was very fond of Ramesh and the child would be with her all the time, these days.

Manjul had lost all count of days and months since her husband went away. Suddenly, one day she felt her head begin to spin. This happened again and again and she was forced to lie down. Her heart would pound furiously and she would begin to vomit. At first she thought it was the anxiety and the cares and worries that had pressed on her soul these last few days that made her feel out of sorts. It was only later that she realised she was pregnant! Now why did he drop this mess on my lap before he went away, she thought!

Her son was born exactly four years after they were married but this pregnancy had come much earlier, the child was only two years old. She didn't want to be pregnant now. She was broken in body and spirit and didn't have the strength to bear another child.

She'd had a fairly easy pregnancy the first time and she'd been so delighted with her condition that minor discomforts didn't seem to matter. But this time it was going to be a difficult pregnancy and worry and ill health only made the situation worse.

One morning as she was gathering hay for the oxen her head began to spin and she collapsed by the haystack. Dumb Devappa saw her lying there and made such a commotion that a woman who was watering the plants in her garden came running to the spot. They carried her home and the woman gave her some lime juice to drink.

"Don't stay here any longer. Go to your father's house for a month or so, till you feel better" she said.

Her father-in-law was standing there too.

"Yes, go. Who'll look after you here?" he said.

When Manjul was ready to leave the next morning the old man was very upset. He embraced his grandson, "Kaveri, take good care of him" he cried.

"Bappa, will you give me one of my mother-in-law's zari edged saris?" Manjul suddenly asked.

The old man quietly passed her the key that hung from his waist. "Take it out of the trunk in the store" he said.

It was the first time that Manjul was holding that key in her hand. As she peered in through the open door all the objects inside seemed to dance like ghosts before her eyes. A woman in a red sari with her forehead streaked with kumkum seemed to hover in one corner, Manjul was terrified. She asked her father-in-law to fetch the sari for her and stuffed it deep into her bag.

As she stepped out of the gate she noticed that the pangaro tree was laden with bright red flowers many of which had fallen on the ground. When she turned towards the hillock instead of going towards the river her father-in-law called out.

"Kaveri, where are you going now?"

"To meet Sumati vhanni."

The old man didn't say another word.

Manjul crossed the edge of the field and the clearing by the temple and began to climb the hillock. Her legs ached and her body trembled with every step but she forced herself to go on. She wanted to give Sumati her mother's sari, to tell her about her brother, to fall into her arms and to weep.

She crossed some fishermen's huts and came to her sister-in-law's house. The door was shut and two or three stakes had been driven into it to hold it fast. Not a cat or a hen scratched about in the yard and the whole place was full of fallen leaves.

"He's gone to cut trees in the forest. Taken his wife and

children with him" a woman from a neighboring hut called out.

"Didn't he work here all this time?"

"Yes. But the quarry is closed these days."

Mañjul picked up her son and turned away.

"You're Mhalu mam's daughter-in-law, aren't you? Sumati always talked about you, my sister-in-law is a fine woman, she always said."

Manjul was filled with despair. It's been seven years since I got married but I couldn't do anything for his unfortunate sister-in-law. Was so pre-occupied with my own troubles. And now it's too late!

The sun was high up when she crossed the river and got to Shiddar. Suman was lighting a fire beneath the cauldron in the bath room. She rushed to take Ramesh in her arms and to help her sister inside.

"Aren't you well, Bai?" she asked.

"No, Bayul, I'm not."

"Why, what's wrong?"

"How's appa?"

"In the fields night and day. When he's home he sits quietly. Doesn't talk like he used to, though."

Manjul lay down wearily on a mat.

"Bai, Bhavoji went away without telling any one, isn't that so?"

"Who told you that?" Manjul raised her head sharply at her words. "Everyone knows that, out here."

Something seemed to strike at Manjul's heart and a wave of sadness spread over her face. She lay back without another word. Appa returned after a long while. Suman spoke to him loudly like one would to a deaf man,

"Appa, Bai has come."

Appa stared at Manjul without a word, there was no trace of recognition on his face. Suddenly his eyes swam with tears and he turned away.

"Wretched lot...this crop of coconuts! Break any one

and it's full of blood! Not a drop of water...what will people pour down their throats, then..?" he began to rant.

Suman rushed out on hearing his voice.

'See Bai. It's six months since he said a word. Now that he's begun to talk he's back to talking rubbish!"

But Manjul just lay there quietly. Uninterested.

It was over six months since Sridhar went away and no one had heard from him in all this time. If someone from the vaddo was going to Hulgey, Manjul would ask him to enquire at her house but there was no news there, either. She'd sit by the door staring into the distance not bothering about food or drink, almost crushed by the sorrow and worry that seemed to weigh on her.

She was into the seventh month of her pregnancy but her limbs were as thin as sticks, only her protruding belly drew everyone's eyes. She has no strength left, how will she bear the trauma of giving birth, the women wondered. She'd come to Shiddar for a month, planning to return when she felt better. But as days passed she seemed to wither away, only concern for her son kept her from taking to her bed. The child in her womb didn't interest her at all.

It was Suman who was a pillar of strength in those days, looking after appa and Bai and taking care of their needs. She'd force Manjul to bathe and to eat. Appa was almost out of his mind, true, but he kept himself busy with work in the fields. He never forgot to place fodder before the oxen. It wasn't clear whether he'd lost his memory or whether he'd just lost the will to live. And Bai and her suffering certainly made him withdraw further into himself.

"Bayul, it's a year since appa fell ill and we haven't done a thing. Must call a ghadi or a joishi, must give him medicine."

"Bhiku anna was saying that in the jungles beyond Gopethitto there's a kunbi who can cure madness. The evil

spirits run away terrified when they hear his voice, it seems."

"Who'll go and call him?"

"Let me talk to Vishram dada."

Vishram and Pandhari went to the Gopethitto jungles and fetched the ghadi He was tall and dark and his long shaggy eyebrows seemed to form a curtain over his eyes. His body was bare except for a small loincloth wound about his waist and a red towel on his head. The cloth bag slung over his shoulder contained the objects he needed for the rituals. He held a long slim cane as he sat on the edge of the court yard on that moonless Wednesday night.

"Isn't it rather late, Ghadi mam?'

"We deal with ghosts and evil spirits. They get restless at night...it's easier to catch them by the neck after dusk."

The people of the vaddo who had drifted to the court yard looked at him with awe and with faith. He swept a small patch beneath the jackfruit tree and placed four fearsome looking dolls at the four corners. He sprinkled kumkum on them and lit a fire in the centre of the patch. He placed a large jackfruit with eyes etched on it beside the fire and it really seemed as though the fruit was gazing at everything around. Digging a small pit he buried a rooster in it so that only its head and the fiery comb on it protruded above the ground

The ghadi squatted by the fire and Ganesh sat before him staring fixedly at his surroundings like a little child. Scooping up a fistful of tiny seeds the ghadi tossed them into the fire and began to leap about as the seeds exploded with sharp popping sounds. Soon Ganesh began to leap about, too. His head moved from side to side, loud hissing sounds came from his lips. The ghadi began to scream,

"Do you see, O wise men of the village..I'm picking on the Spirit that is hiding in this frame! I'll drive him out ... out beyond the seven frontiers...shut him in a bottle and toss him beyond the seven seas..!"

He busied himself with the seeds once again.

"One of the elders in the village must come up here..." Vishnu pushed Ram dada forward.

"The son-in-law is haunting him..." The ghadi finally declared.

"Whose son-in-law..?" Ram dada, asked, hesitantly.

"Don't you remember that cursed tale..? Must be twelve years or so ago..a son-in-law of this village, a poor orphan, came from Hankon to take his bride away. The father-in-law beat him and cursed him and drove him away. Then the poor youth hung himself from that tree by the river...!"

"Yes, we remember. His widow mourns for him even today..."

"That son-in-law..his spirit roams about this neighborhood!"

"Do something, O ghadi! Set it at rest!"

The ghadi sprang up and grabbed Ganesh by the hair. He threw him on the ground dragging him this way and that in the dust.

"Get out...leave this body at once! I'll beat you with a stick, kick you, throw you into the deepest ocean...Out! Out, I say!"

Ganesh was barely conscious of his surroundings, moaning and making inarticulate sounds. Suman stood on one side with the other men and women of the vaddo, Manjul however, was kept away as pregnant women weren't allowed to witness such destructive scenes.

"Leave this body at once! I command you, in the name of the spirits, I command you in the name of the Kshetrapal! Get out!"

The ghadi continued to leap about in a frenzy screaming at Ganesh and pushing him to the ground. Suddenly he swung his cane in the air and brought it down on Ganesh's back and legs.

"Appa" Suman screamed, rushing forward. "Ram dada! Look, he's beating appa!" She rushed to the ghadi

and grabbed the cane in his hand. "I won't let you beat appa" she said.

Ram dada hurried up to her.

"Your appa won't get hurt..he's beating the evil spirit, not your father."

"No. I won't let him do that again!" she declared.

The ghadi was livid with rage.

"Impure! She's touched my holy cane and made everything impure! Wretched girl! The evil spirit will now enter your body ... And sit on your heart wringing your neck!"

Vishram came forward. "She's just a child, ghadi mam, pay no attention to her. You go ahead with the rituals."

"This wretched creature has tampered with the rituals that seven generations of our family have performed! I won't stay here any longer...this spirit will torment you forever!"

He gathered the implements, stuffed them into his bag and strode away leaving the rooster half buried in the ground. No one went to stop him. One by one the people of the vaddo returned to their homes.

"What is this wretched girl up to! How well the ghadi was conducting all the rituals. Now let her sit there with her mad father and the spirit that has taken possession of him!" Avdu ajji exclaimed.

Suman and Govind helped appa into the house. Three bloody welts had formed on his body where the cane had struck him. "What sort of man is this... A ghadi or a demon!" Manjul exclaimed in horror.

"If Suman hadn't stopped him Manjul tai, he would have beaten mama black and blue. Beating the evil spirit, he says! Then what about these welts?"

The rooster that was buried up to its neck kept crowing loudly through out the night. No one dared to go there and set it free. Each man sat in his house and declared that the evil Spirits would now be more restless than ever before!

The crowing stopped at the crack of dawn, Suman saw that the rooster was dead. She grabbed it by its neck and pulled it out of the ground. Taking care to see that no one was around she threw the dead creature into the bushes beyond the hedge.

Manjul moaned in pain and moved about restlessly for three whole days. She didn't have the strength to get up any longer. "Suman, send for the Vaijini. The baby will be born by evening" she said.

Shevthu, the midwife who lived in the vaddo by the tamarind tree rushed to their house with her bag in her hand. She was aghast. Did this woman have the strength to give birth, she wondered. She rubbed something on Manjul's belly and applied a hot fomentation on it. All the while she talked to the child within

"Hey you! Move this side...turn your head this way. Keep your legs straight now, we don't want any mischief! Don't get stuck any where.. your mother doesn't have any strength!"

Shevthu the Vaijini was a garrulous and ugly creature with big rough hands but she was skilled at her job. She was the local mid wife and she dispensed medicines too.

"Not one infant delivered by these hands has died in all these years!" she proudly declared.

"But that Shamba's son died within a month."

"That's not my fault ! Shamba's wife ate a plateful of kasale aluva shaak only fifteen days after the baby was born! It caught a cold when it drank her milk...and then it died."

Manjul gave birth to a baby girl after writhing in pain for three whole days. She turned her back to the infant and lay there listlessly. Her life seemed to be ebbing away slowly as her skin turned pale and stuck to her bones. The infant would suck greedily at her dry breast and then begin to wail.

Suman didn't have a minute to spare. When appa withdrew into his own world she begged Vithoba to work on their fields along with his own. Yet, the house and the land, appa and Bai and the two little ones kept her so busy that she was ready to topple over by the time it was night. She had stopped bothering about her clothes or her appearance. Only Manjul's condition weighed upon her mind, eating into her peace.

Govind came there often these days.

"Aren't you feeling well tai?" he would ask.

"I'm all right. Nothing will happen to me... don't worry" Manjul always replied.

The house seemed to come alive only when Govind was there, and Suman's eyes shone with joy and peace. She seemed to have lost all interest in life and in her appearance. Even Govind would get irritated with her careless ways, can't this girl even tie a ribbon in her hair, he would think. But sometimes he would be overcome by a wave of desire, he would yearn to sweep this unkempt, untidy Suman into his arms, to assure her of his love. But Suman plodded on, as though she was chained to an endless sequence of chores.

"Bai, what's wrong?"

"Don't cry, Bayul. You mustn't break down...where are the children....?"

"Here....look...."

Manjul turned her head with a great deal of effort and stared at her children helplessly. The infant lay on a quilt wrapped in a strip of cloth. Three year old Ramesh sat leaning against the wall, his face serious as though he realised that his mother was going farther and farther away. Tears welled up in Manjul's sunken eyes, the muscles of her face twitched and her head fell back all of a sudden.

"Bai...!"Suman screamed.

Gokul mavshi and Sumitra mavshi came running in. someone fetched Salu ajji who applied hot fomentation's and medicinal pastes and Manjul slowly came back to her senses. Her life had been ebbing away steadily since the day she had given birth but she waved her hand weakly when anyone spoke of doctors or hospitals.

Yet Shevthu the Vaijini kept insisting,

"Take her to the doctor at Karwar ...only God can save her now!"

Ganesh was unravelling the threads from an old blanket and rolling them into a ball.

"Appa, Bai is getting worse" Suman said to him.

"Told you right then to get me some length of rope. The boatman was wearing such a nice, red loin cloth... where is he now?" Ganesh was lost in his own world.

"What sort of madness is this! You sit in your own world... We're the ones who are dying here...!" Suman was irritated with the man.

As evening fell and news of Manjul's condition spread, the men of the vaddo gathered in their house. Even Bhaskar, who normally didn't go to anyone's house, hovered about the yard. It was hard to say whether Manjul was conscious, she seemed to breathe with difficulty and a rattling noise came from her throat. Sometimes she'd try to lift a hand but it would soon fall back with a thump.

"Wretched village, this is. Once the launch and the early morning boat have sailed off there's no other transport throughout the day! They've been saying buses will ply for so many years now... But nothing has begin yet!"

"Must take the girl to the big hospital at Karwar tomorrow morning."

"Should we go to Halgey and fetch that doctor?"

"What will he do? She's so ill...it's only another night. Let's take her by the morning launch to Karwar."

"The doctor from Halgey doesn't see patients at night, any way."

Manjul's breath came in wheezes and gasps all through

the night and someone or the other from the vaddo was always by her side. At daybreak, however, there was no one around. A lamp flickered dimly throwing tiny spears of red light into the surrounding darkness. Manjul raised a weak hand and touched Suman's head as she nodded drowsily by her side.

"What...what do you want, Bai?"

"The children.... bring them...."

Suman brought the sleeping boy and laid him by Manjul's side and crouched there with the infant in her arms.

"Bayul... I put the children in your lap.... look after them! But what about your own..." Tears flowed down Manjul's cheeks.

"You'll get well, Bai."

Manjul grasped Suman's hand.

"Promise ..... Promise me, you won't send them away....."

Manjul fell back as though she was very tired. Suman stared at her and her children, with sorrow and pity in her eyes. For a minute she imagined it was herself lying there, that it was her life that was sinking deeper and deeper. Now someone will come and push us into a dark, bottomless pit ... she thought.

The men began preparations to take Manjul to Karwar early the next morning. The pier where the launch docked was about two miles away. How would they take her there? They began to fashion a make shift sling in which she could lie. Manjul's breath seemed to be catching in her throat with a gasping sound. Her eyes would flutter open and then fall shut again if someone called her name. Slowly her breath became shallow and the strength ebbed out of her, she could no longer open her eyes. Only Suman sat there calling out her name again and again. When the men went to pick Manjul up and place her in the sling however, her head had rolled back and her body was stiff. Everyone froze. Suman screamed... a long, piercing shriek

that shook the earth and rent the skies and filtered through the trees and palm fronds as it settled on the river's waves.

The whole vaddo assembled in the house and the court yard. "A month, now, since she's been ill. Just wouldn't hear of going to a doctor."

"We thought it was because of the baby ... who knew she'd go so soon!"

"Two innocent children ...the little one only a month old...and such a no-good creature for a father, too!"

Ganesh had drifted away from everyone and everything during these last few months. He had stopped going to the fields. He just sat there quietly or muttered continuously to himself.

The men of the vaddo squatted in the court yard and in the house, each man besieged with memories of the girl. Manjul had grown up right before their eyes. And now they had to cremate her ...no one felt quite up to the task.

Khushali remembered how fond she had been of flowers, how she'd roam about the trees and bushes gathering blossoms with her baby sister perched on her hip. One afternoon, when she was very little, he'd caught her beneath the suranga tree. He'd scolded her soundly and she'd dropped the skirt of her dress which was full of blossoms and she'd begun to cry. Then Khushali had gathered the flowers himself and put them into the skirt of her dress. He'd picked up the baby that was lying on the ground and placed it in her arms..!

How sweetly she spoke to everyone, when she called you 'anna' her face lit up as though a flower had bloomed! No wonder everyone loved her so! Affectionate young thing, seems just yesterday that she was married and the whole vaddo was gathered here to say goodbye. That slip of a girl in a nine yard wedding sari still hovers before my eyes...! How she sat with her eyes trained on the river, with no interest in life since her husband went away.....!

Suman wailed loudly beating her head on the ground, then suddenly she seemed to turn into stone. She sat there

silently staring into a dark void that had no end. Govind hovered as a dim shape somewhere in that void . Bai was moving farther and farther away into the darkness. Bai! Where do you go with my dreams? See, your little ones hunger for milk, they yearn for your kisses ...who do they think will feed them now? I can't be a mother to them like you were..!

The women dressed Manjul in a new sari and blouse. Suman stared at them blankly ...where do you take my sister, who's been like a mother to me .... the people from the other vaddos had begun to arrive as the news spread, Suman clung to Mukund mama and cried her heart out.

Narshinv and Vishnu had been sent to the Joishi to check on the time of the death and the other rituals. They returned with all the things that would be necessary for the cremation.

"The star that ruled at the time of her death is a favourable one, no need to worry about that. But he says we can't cremate her here, she must be cremated within the borders of her husband's village. Her son Ramesh is not yet three, so he can't set fire to her corpse."

The elders of the vaddo, Ram dada, Ganpat ajjo, Bhaskar anna spoke in low tones wondering how these problems could be solved.

"Let's take the body to her husband's house. Let them do what they think fit."

Khushali lost his temper at this.

"Leave the body there and come away..like she's some unknown, unidentified corpse? No! Send word to them. They can come and take her away if they want to. Or we'll cremate our daughter with our own hands!"

"But the shastras don't allow this, Khushali..."

"Throw those shastras away, then"!

"Let's send word to them first ...then we'll see what happens."

Pandhari and Yashwant set off for Hulgey at once. No one said a word on the way. It was as though a mantle of

sorrow had spread all over the place. The boatman took them across to a spot just below Mhalu's house.

"He's not in his senses most of the time... Go and see what happens ..." he said. Then, in a low voice as though speaking to himself, "She looked like a goddess when she sat in my boat ...I took the couple across after they were married."

Mhalu's house stood in a state of ruin. Everything was cold and still as though the inmates had gone away leaving the doors and gates wide open. A few cows were feasting on the plantain trees in the orchard, trampling the young plants underfoot. The court yard was full of mud and rubbish and the tulsi pedestal had collapsed during the rains.

"Is any one in?" Pandhari called out, banging on the door.

"Who's there?"

"We've come from Shiddar..."

They heard someone moaning for a while, then Mhalu lurched out of the door.

"Aren't you well Mhalu mam?"

"Well ! I'll only be well after I'm dead ! What do you want? Have you brought bad news ...ofcourse! Or you wouldn't come here..."

"Yes your daughter-in-law, Manjul... She was ill for six months..."

The old man was almost in tears.

"I knew... I knew she wouldn't recover! Good girl ... very soft heart she had.. but she wasn't lucky ! Walked into this house and everything got destroyed..."

Pandhari seethed with rage at his words but Yashwant kept him quiet. People were gathering by the hedge, listening to their conversation. Had these people heard the news already ...it didn't take long for bad news to travel, Yashwant thought.

"What do we do with the body? Why don't you fetch her here and cremate her."

The old man almost toppled over. Yashwant grabbed him and guided him to a chair. "She's your daughter-in-law. It's her right to be cremated on this land."

"My son is dead .. what of my daughter-in-law, then? I'm a broken man...no one to look after me. What will I do about her, then? Let her father do whatever he can."

"She's left two innocent children."

"Whatever is written in their fate will happen...."

The old man turned away from them and stumbled into the house. As Pandhari and Yashwant walked out of the court-yard they came upon a group of villagers.

"A daughter-in-law from your clan lies there dead ... what are you waiting for? Who will cremate that body?" Pandhari was angry.

"We can bring the body here and cremate it but who will perform the last rites? So many rituals to be performed on the twelfth day, the thirteenth day....it's a sin not to perform them. And her spirit won't be free...." an old man explained.

As they hurried away they noticed someone following them with a log of wood balanced on his head. "Who's he?" Pandhari asked. "I don't know," Yashwant replied. The man placed the log in the boat and tears streamed down his cheeks as he made loud guttural noises waving his arms about.

"Who's he, what does he say, Tarya maam?"

"This is Dumb Devappa. Very fond of Ganesh's daughter, he was. Says, at least one piece of wood from her husband's house should fall on her pyre, so he's carrying this...." the boatman explained.

The boat cut through the water with a swishing sound, not another sound was heard. The fields and gardens on either side of the river seemed to be shrouded in smoke, even the sunlight didn't seem as bright as it usually did.

"This Devappa tended the cattle in his aunt's house as a child, as long as she was alive. A dhanmantary he met there taught him how to treat sick animals...now people

come running to him when their cows and calves fall ill. This dumb doctor loves dumb animals ...understands them well. One slap on the bullock's back and he knows what's wrong with it...!"

Devappa picked up the log and set off as soon as the boat touched the bank. Vishnu and Yashwant went straight to the Joishi's house.

"The husband's people are unwilling to take the body, what do we do now?" they asked.

"Let the father give up a small piece of land...cremate her there. But no one from her father's clan can set fire to the body..."

An old man from her husband's village has come... we'll ask him to do so..."

"No! An old man cannot set fire to the corpse of a younger person!"

People were squatting in little groups when they got to the vaddo, the women huddled around Manjul. No one was saying anything calculated to make someone cry, for who was there in that house who could be made to cry? Suman was beyond all such efforts and the father sat in the hall wrapped in his own world, unraveling thread from a tattered piece of cloth and rolling it into a ball.

"They're not coming! Wretched beggars! She's our daughter, our sister...we'll cremate her ourselves!" Pandhari raged.

Everyone began to talk in whispers about how things should be carried out. Dumb Devappa sat on the edge of the court yard with the log resting against a tree.

"Ganesh is beyond all such things...how do we make him donate that piece of land?" Ganpat ajja asked.

"Ganpat bab, you are the oldest of our clan. This land has been divided amongst us today, but once it belonged to the same family...that of our ancestor. Sprinkle some water on a tulsi leaf and ritually donate that patch by the tamarind to this daughter of this village...let's cremate her there" Ram dada declared.

Everyone agreed and they started fashioning a bier for the corpse. Keshav spilt the bamboos with his sickle and Soyru and Khushali fashioned the pieces into a frame. The others picked up logs and pieces of wood and set off for the field by the tamarind. Ganpat ajjo fashioned a container with mango leaves and picked up the pitcher of water and the tulsi.

"All this is fine, but who will set the corpse alight? No one from her father's clan is allowed to do that" he said.

The elders of the village were thrown into a quandary all over again. The one who would set fire to the corpse had to be a relative but he couldn't belong to her father's clan!

Govind used to come and sit by Manjul's side when she was ill. She would clasp his hand in her's trying to say something, her fingers trembling helplessly. When he was setting off for Karwar to take the matriculation exam she came into the alley to bid him farewell. She was delighted when she heard that he had passed. For a moment she forgot her pain and suffering and her face was wreathed in smiles. That was perhaps the last time she was really happy in recent months.

As the elders sat there debating over who would cremate the body Govind suddenly came forward.

"Ajja, I'll do it" he said.

Ganpat ajja glanced at Bhaskar who was sitting there silently.

"You are a nephew... Not a son of the clan. So there can be no objection to you. But remember, there are a lot of elaborate rituals after the cremation..."

"I'll do everything, ajja!"

"What do you say, Bhaskar?"

"He says he'll do it. Let him." But Bhaskar's voice seemed gruff as though he was not too happy about all this.

Soyru placed a small mud pot in a string holder and handed it to Govind together with a flaming piece of dried

dung. They laid Manjul's corpse in the court yard, tucked masses of flowers in her hair and performed the rituals that signified that she was a married woman whose husband was still alive. As they lifted the body on to the bier people began to sob. Mad Vitobha beat his breast and wailed aloud as Suman fell to the ground, senseless.

Shamba, who lived in the Devul vaddo was standing on one side. People's eyes swim with tears when they say goodbye to a bride setting off for her husband's house. How can such people keep their emotions in check when her corpse is carried out of the house, he thought.

Suman did not know who looked after Manjul's children that day, nor did she care to see where they were or whether they had been fed. When someone brought them home and laid the sleeping children down in the hall the next morning she stared at them disinterestedly.

"Mama. Send word to their father...tell him to take them away" she suddenly blurted to her uncle who had come down from Kerwadi.

No one wanted to talk about the children. This was a difficult situation and no one could see what could be done about them.

The elder boy who was almost three could sense that something terrible had happened, that his mother who used to be around was nowhere in sight and that people were crying. He sat solemnly with his finger in his mouth, staring at everyone.

The younger child would suddenly begin to cry and someone would pick it up and try to soothe it. They would bring milk from their houses and feed it. Suman was sick of the child's wails. She knew that the relatives and neighbours trooping in and out of the house would look after the child till the rituals marking the thirteenth day after Manjul's death. After that each of them would go his own way.

Govind performed all the duties and rituals without any complaint. He poured a glass of milk on the cold ashes

where Manjul was cremated early every morning and read from the Garuda Purana before he went to bed. He was not allowed to oil his hair or eat anything that was fried or roasted, sour or sweet while the rituals were in progress. He lived on rice gruel in the afternoon and his frugal meal of rice and sol khadhi had to be completed before sunset.

He lived in Suman's house these days and spent the nights there, too. Suman would sit in some corner quite withdrawn from all the activity that was taking place. If someone asked where something was she would point a finger in silence.

Govind however, bustled about all day. Sometimes he'd sit beside Suman in silence. It was as though the sprouts that were emerging from the seeds had suddenly stopped growing, as though all that was interesting had suddenly vanished from their lives. He wanted to say so much .... about Manjul tai, about himself...but some strange wall of silence seemed to have cropped up between them. It was only when she refused to eat that he would forcibly place a platter before her and stand there as though he was urging her on.

The Smashan shuddhi or rituals marking the end of the cremation took place on the ninth day. Govind bathed in cold water and then the barber shaved his head clean except for a tiny tuft of hair at the back of his head. He then took the basket containing Manjul's bones and ashes and immersed them in the Kali river.

The Sraddh rituals continued till the eleventh day after Manjul's death and on the twelfth day was the community feast. His mama smeared oil on his head and fed him some sweets to mark the end of the rituals. There were so many traditions that had to be followed, so many rites to be performed. He had to bathe in cold water and sit before the priest in wet clothes so many times .... yet Govind did everything he was asked to without a murmur of protest.

Suman's mama, Mukund mama and all the people of the vaddo worked hard during those thirteen days. Her uncle brought rice and jaggery and coconuts from kerwadi for the twelfth day ceremony. He'd come early in the morning and return home late at night for only the immediate family was allowed to spend the night in the house of mourning. His voice would turn gruff when he spoke of Suman or Manjul and then he would begin to weep.

"What do I do with these two?" Suman clung to him, sobbing loudly when it was time for him to leave.

"Let's see ... Let's see what can be done" he said turning away as though relieved that the responsibility was not his.

Everyone returned to their own homes and duties at the end of the thirteenth day. Even Govind went back home. Only appa sitting there shaking his head, and the two innocent children remained in the house with Suman ...empty hearts and minds and an empty house as well.

Suman sat against the wall while the children slept by her side. She'd always been so fond of Bai's son Ramesh ... but now she didn't care if someone took him away. The flickering lamp light fell on the boy's innocent face. But this was Bai's face ..! Bai had made her promise that she would look after the children!

Bai seemed to appear in her dreams...in the midst of the light and shadow she could see Bai beside the two children who were sobbing their hearts out ...the court yard was littered with bamboo and ropes and parts of the bier and a half burnt palm frond lay on one side. Bai was asking her something..she couldn't hear a word ...or had she covered her ears with her hands to shut the words out?

Ramesh's face looked just like Bai's used to look when she was ill. Suman passed a hand softly over his head..see how rough his hair had become, the boy seemed ill, she thought. Insists on calling me Bayul mavshi! How naughty he used to be, how he used to cry ...but these days he just

sits there quietly as though he understands everything! These people didn't even bring him forward when they were taking his mother away!

Suman suddenly bent over him and clasped him in her arms. The boy stirred in his sleep uncomfortably but she didn't let him go.

Ganesh would suddenly start talking, and begin to wag his head. He would spout a stream of words that had no meaning or connection talking of the plantain tree that bore fruit in the court yard and then moving on to some widow who sat before her house in some distant land. Ram dada had gone up to him as he sat unravelling threads when they were taking Manjul's corpse away.

"Ganesh, they're taking your daughter away" he'd said.

But Ganesh had just stared at him with such a vacant look that Ram dada had turned away nervously and busied himself spreading plantain leaves on the bier.

"The ghadi would have driven the evil spirit away ... but this girl had to interfere! And now all this! Avdu ajji grumbled just three days after Manjul's death. Suman listened to her in silence.

About a month after this Krishnanand, who worked in the police force in Goa, dropped in for a visit.

"Krishnanand Bhau, we must take appa to a good doctor. Do you know anyone in Goa?" she asked.

"I think we must put him in a hospital for some time. There's one at Altino.... I stay quite close. Bring him to Panaji next Wednesday. I'll look after everything after that."

"How can I take him to Panaji?"

"Come with someone who knows the way."

"With whom? The men of the vaddo have never stepped out of this village. Those of you who are educated don't stay here any more."

"Come with Govind... Bhaskar anna's nephew. He's been to Panaji before."

Suman was taken aback for a moment. "Let's see. I'll talk to him" she said.

"You come. I'll be at the police station in Panaji, anyone will show you the way. If you take the early morning boat and then take the bus from the fort you'll get to Panaji by noon. Govind knows all this."

That evening Suman asked Govind if he had been to Panaji.

"That last time I went home to Asnoti some youngsters from the village were going to Panaji to join the police force. I went with them. Just like that, to see Goa. We slept in the Lakshmi temple that night."

"Do you know where the Panaji police station is?"

"That's where you go to join the police force. And Narahari mam's son Krishnanand works there."

Suman was relieved.

"Govind, let's take appa to Panaji. There's a big hospital there, they say."

Govind remained silent.

"Won't you come with me?"

Must ask mama and mami..." Suman could see that he was scared. These days whenever Govind went to Suman's house or returned from her place his aunt and uncle got very agitated. Where did you go, they'd snap, their words loaded with anger. "You speak to them, Suman... Tell them we have to take mama there..."

The next morning Suman dropped in at Bhaskar anna's house. This was the first time she was going there after Bai's death. She sat quietly on the bench like a poor motherless child. Sarasvati mavshi came up to her and placed a hand on her shoulder as she began to sob.

"Don't cry. What is it you want?" she asked.

Suman wiped her eyes and looked up at the woman. Sarasvati was thin and pale but she worked hard all day. Her house, her garden and court yard were so neat and

tidy that people said it was like a Brahmin homestead in a lower caste Konkani neighbourhood. But all of a sudden Sarasvati would fall ill and take to her bed for days at a time. People said she was pining for a child since she didn't have any of her own and this was affecting her health.

Someone was chopping wood in the garden beyond their house and Suman could barely make herself heard above the noise.

"That mango tree is covered with wild creepers, so the young palm doesn't get enough sunlight. I've told Soma to cut off a branch...now why did you come?" she asked.

"Mavshi, appa must be taken to the hospital in Panaji, Krishnanand bhau told me to come. Govind and I will take him."

Sarasvati remained silent for a moment.

"Does Govind know the way?"

"He's gone there before, he says."

"Go, then."

How nice you are Sarasvati mavshi, Suman said to herself staring at the woman with gratitude in her eyes.

"Where will you spend the night if you get late?"

"Krishnanad bhau lives there, doesn't he...? Where's anna gone, mavshi?"

"To the Shanbhog's office to check some official papers."

A vague sense of unease filled Suman's heart. She got up to go. Suddenly Sarasvati came close.

"You are a girl, be careful! People are saying many things...I've heard them too. What is written in your fate will happen...but be careful.... control yourselves, now..!"

'I swear...! There's nothing like that, mavshi!"

Sarasvati brought four green plantains and gave them to her. "Make a nice shaak for your father" she said.

The house looked cold and still today. Suman had spent four years in the school on the upper floor, rushing up and down those stairs. When the children read their lessons or recited the tables aloud the whole vaddo used to

echo with their voices. But now the government had built a new school outside the vaddo and Jairam master had been transferred to some distant place. Suman felt that the school should still have been held here, the house would have seemed familiar then, not cold and aloof as it did today!

Suman didn't know how to cook the green plantains. The curry she made seemed thick and unappetizing. But appa mixed it with the rice on his plate and swallowed it at once. He did this all the time. Suman would serve the food and guide his hand to the plate and in a matter of moments he'd finish his meal, stuffing the food into his mouth without pause.

The morning boat would take advantage of the low tide and the wind that blew down stream in the early hours. Suman woke up at midnight on Wednesday and knocked at Narshinv's door,

"Anna, dress appa in a dhoti and a shirt. We must get to the pier before the boat arrives" She said.

Narshinv stood in the court yard and stared up at the sky. "The cluster of Katya nakshatras are still overhead, why dress him up so early" he asked.

Narshinv sat on the porch nodding drowsily for quite some time. Then he woke Ganesh and took him to the foot of the palm where he splashed some water on his face. He wiped it with the end of his towel and wrapped a fresh dhoti about his hips.

Govind appeared in the court yard with a packet of polis which his mami had packed for their lunch. Suman had taken the children to Gokul mavshi's house the previous evening, 'feed them rice water or anything for one day' she had pleaded. Five or six men with lanterns in their hands had gathered in the court yard by this time.

"We'll come to the pier with you" they said as Narshinv took Ganesh by one arm and Yashwant took the other. Ganesh was calm and quiet, was this man really mad or had he gone into some yogic trance ... It was impossible to say !

Darkneśs lay heavy on the water of the Kali river as though some thick, dark ointment had been smeared on its surface. A fine spray of dew had fallen and a light mist swirled above the water. The cold breeze, typical of the month of Karthik made them wrap their arms about their bodies as they heard the odd boat approach, its white sail flapping dimly in the darkness.

They would call out 'Oooo...Hu...eeee...yyy.....but the boat would swish past with the boatman chanting 'Naaa...re... Naaa... re...' for the boats could not dock at any pier at will. After a while the boat that was scheduled to stop at their pier arrived and Narshinv and Yashwant guided Ganesh through the knee deep water into the boat.

When they got to the fort at the mouth of the river the sun was just rising in the sky and the little islands, the shrubs and bushes and the vast ocean lay like a magical spectacle before their eyes. Govind's eyes darted about in amazement like gulls dart and swoop over the surface of the sea but Suman sat clutching appa's hand, fear and worry seemed to weigh her down.

It was half past eleven when they got to the police station at Panaji where Govind walked in through the high imposing doorway while Suman and Ganesh waited outside. No one seemed to know where Krishnanad Goaonkar was. Finally, someone looked into a book and said that a dead body had been washed up at Dona Paula and that he had accompanied the officer to the spot.

"When will he come back?"

"Can't say. Will have to take possession of the body, get the post mortem done. Then hand it to the relatives ... might be late."

Govind didn't understand very much but he realised that Krishnanand had gone somewhere and wouldn't be back very soon. Suman was beside herself with worry, what would they do now in this vast, unfamiliar ocean of people, she thought. They stood there uncertainly for quite

some time. Then Govind went up to one of the police men and said

"Krishnanand Gaonkar asked us to come today. This uncle of mine is ill..... must get him to the hospital for mad people....."

"Gaonkar won't be back till late. Take a rickshaw and go to the the hospital ..... they 'll admit him."

"Where is this hospital?"

"The police man pointed up the hill which seemed to loom over them. There were many tall buildings on that hill and Govind couldn't quite understand how that would get there. The police man stopped a rickshaw and told them to get in.

"That's Altinor ...the Mental Hospital. Pay the driver two rupees..."

The Mental Hospital at Altinor seemed like a jail to Suman's frightened eyes. She shrank into herself as screams wafted out of the building. They sat appa down on a white bench outside and Govind pressed his face against a glass door to see if anyone was inside.

A very stout nurse sat by a table just within the door. She was so fair and ruddy that blood seemed to seep out of her skin. Govind stared at the blonde hair on her upper lip wondering whether it was a man or a woman before him. She got to her feet and marched towards him balancing her massive girth on a pair of high heeled shoes.

"What do you want? Where are you from?" she barked.

"This is my father. He's not right in the head..."

"From Karwar, are you?"

"Yes. Came by the morning bus from the fort."

"We don't admit patients from outside Goa."

"Please madam ...we've come from so far ...took the boat at midnight..."

"Told you we can't take you *Ghatis* ...Not without a certificate from the authorities..."

In the mean time an elderly man came out through a

door. "What 's the matter..?" he asked.

"Dottore, they're from Karwar. Want to admit that old man."

The doctor was old and bent and his head kept nodding up and down. His clothes hung loosely on his frame and his words slurred as he spoke. He placed a hand on Govind's shoulder and explained that they couldn't take patients from outside Goa. Go to the law office and get a certificate stating that the patient is from Goa itself, he suggested.

"Where's that office?"

"Down there. In Cidade. By the Court."

"Where?"

A youth dressed in black clothes stood just behind them. "Go down the way you came. It's quicker if you go past the Lakshmi temple. Ask anyone, they'll show you the law office."

Suman thought the boy's accent seemed familiar.

"Where are you from?" she asked but the youth just waved them away.

All of Panaji seemed to lie at their feet as they gazed down from the top of the hill but the road didn't seem to end as they walked down the slope. Govind felt that he recognised the way when they got to the Lakshmi temple where he had stayed on his last trip to Goa. Appa walked meekly by their side, like an animal led by a rope tied to its halter.

"That fellow seemed to be from Karwar" Govind commented.

"Showed no reaction when I asked ...and why did she call us 'Ghati' like that ..?'

"They probably mean 'poor' when they say 'Ghati' in these parts."

"Are we poor?"

"Look at these buildings and cars. Everyone here must be very rich." "Everyone knows Konkani here. I was scared no one would understand us."

They asked someone where the law office was.

"Come with me, I'll show you the way" he said and took them right up to the gate

A dirty watchman was slouched outside the imposing law office like someone who had watched a play all night and couldn't keep his eyes open.

They were taken aback to see such an unkempt figure at the door of such an imposing building. However he spoke to them in such a kind and sympathetic tone that their spirits perked up.

"The Saheb is from your city. Go and fall at his feet" he advised.

The officer was tall, dark and bony and not a muscle flickered on his face as he sat on a high chair like an actor on stage. A fair, good looking gentleman in spotless white clothes sat before him.

"Sahiba, this is my uncle. Her father. He's not right in the head. Must put him in the hospital."

The officer listened gravely with his eyes shut .

"You stay in Karwar. Come from there..?"

"Yes, Sahiba."

"Outsiders cannot get into this hospital. Go to Dharwad. That hospital is for you."

"But, sir..."

"Shambhu ! Take them away!"

The man in white clothes tried to say something in English but the officer waved him away.

Suman and Govind stood silently outside the office with appa by their side. Tears welled up in Suman's eyes and she wiped them on her sleeve.

They made a strange sight as they stood outside the law office—Govind, in his white shirt and short khaki trousers, Suman in her long green skirt and full sleeved blouse, and appa whose dhoti was wound tightly about his waist. They were like a group of rustics who had strayed into the city, almost jumping out of their skins when a vehicle passed close by them.

"Govind, let's take the bus and go back."

"Let me see if Krishnanad is back, first."

"No ! Let's go ..."

All of a sudden the fair, good looking gentleman dressed in white clothes came up to them.

"Come. I'll get him admitted. That officer is from Karwar too, but he's become a big man here. Says there's no place for outsiders in the hospital... He's an outsider too. He must give up his job and go away, then...!"

They followed the man to the police station noting that quite a few people raised their hands to their foreheads in salutation as he passed by. Must be an important officer, they thought. The man spoke to the officer in charge. Then he turned to the havaldar and ordered in loud tones.

Govind asked one of the policemen who the gentleman was. "that's Lawyer Mashelkar ...a freedom fighter. He's a famous advocate now."

The havaldar scribbled something on a sheet of paper and soon they were put into a jeep and driven up to Altinor, their hearts full of gratitude to this stranger who had appeared, like God, before their eyes.

The policeman in the jeep showed some documents to the doctor who examined appa briefly and ordered the attendant to take him in. Appa looked at Suman for a long moment. Suddenly he screamed "No..No..!" He shook himself free and rushed out, crashing into the doctor's table on the way. The policeman sprang on him and clasped him tightly from behind. They dragged him into the hospital his screaming voice wafting through the closed doors till it vanished in the distance.

Suman began to sob like a small child.

"Govind, let's take appa back!" she cried as Govind's eyes also welled up with tears.

Suddenly they heard the sound of the jeep's horn and saw the policeman waving at them. Govind wiped his eyes and putting his arm around Suman drew her to the jeep.

She kept crying as the jeep carried them down to the foot of the hill.

The packet of polis still remained in Govind's hands.

"Eat some of those, Govind" Suman said.

"Won't you eat some?"

"No."

"Then I won't, either."

"All right, let's eat a little, then."

They sat in the shade of some bushes and ate some of the polis which Govind's mami had packed for them. They drank some water from a nearby tap and made their way to the bus stand. It was almost three thirty by then and the bus to the fort was ready to leave.

"It'll be dark by the time we get to the fort. If we can't go home where will we stay?" Govind was anxious.

"We'll see what happens. Let's get to the fort first."

They sat side by side in silence, leaning against each other, this unmarried girl and this young boy. Suman was lost in thoughts of her father, Govind couldn't think of anything to say.

"This river is just like our Kali river, isn't it?" he finally remarked as the bus crossed the Zuari at the Borye bridge.

"That other river at Panaji is also like our Kali. Even the hills and villages are like Karwar, people also speak in the same way !"

When they got to the fort there were no buses or boats that would go upstream. They didn't quite know what to do. It was getting dark and they could barely make out the shapes of two or three boats docked at the kodibag pier on the opposite bank, with their sails tightly furled and their bare masts poking into the sky.

They crossed the river by motor launch. The boats docked at the pier were empty except for one boat where someone was working at the bottom of the boat in the light of an oil lamp with only the top of his head in sight.

"When will this boat leave?" Govind asked, his foot on the plank. "Not now. At day break, tomorrow. They

Khargey farmers have brought their paddy to the rice mills ...work is going on right now," the man didn't bother to turn around.

"We'd been to Goa. Got held up there. We'll sit in the boat."

The boatman turned to look at them. He was quite old and his face was a mass of wrinkles but his body was firm and strong. The sparse grey hair on his head and his wrinkled face made it seem as though an old man's head had been stuck on a younger man's body.

"The boat is open and the cold wind of Karthik is blowing. Go spend the night in some relative's house ..." He advised. "What'll we do, Suman? Who do we know here?"

"Why? There's Ram dada's son in the police lines ...But let's not go any where. Let's sit in the boat."

"Aren't you scared?"

"I'm with you and you're a man, why should I be scared then?"

"Mama, we'll sit here" Govind declared and they crept under the thatched awning in the middle of the boat. There was only a piece of thatch above their heads the sides were open to the cold breeze. Suman sat hugging her knees with her long skirt wrapped about her legs, Govind stood slightly apart.

The boatman was sitting by a stove, stirring something in a pot and soaking in the warmth from the fire. The bubbling pot and the blaze from the fire aroused pangs of hunger in their stomachs, but not a word did they say. The man lifted the pot off the fire muttering to himself all the while as though he were reciting his prayers. They could hear him sloshing the gruel into a platter.

"You're Ganesh's daughter... from the lower vaddo, aren't you? You're a Konkani and we are Bhandaris ...so you won't eat what we cook ...otherwise I'd give you a platter of gruel."

Suman was astonished to see that he had recognised

her. " No, mama, that's all right ! Give us a little gruel if you have any left over" she said.

"We always cook enough for two persons even if only one is going to eat. Who knows when some hungry person will come to one's door...but I'm surprised that you will eat !"

Rinsing a fresh plate he filled it with gruel and passed it to them. Suman said to Govind, "Eat."

The boy stood there hesitantly for a while till Suman said firmly, "Eat. Don't divide food into divisions of caste ... food is always pure, so eat !"

"And you?"

"I'll eat what's left over after you" she whispered into his ear and as they supped on the plate of rice gruel their hunger began to subside.

Everything was quiet and still by this time and the lights in Kodibag were being extinguished one by one. Only the popping sounds from the rice mills in the distance could be heard.

"Here...take one of my blankets ..." the boatman said tossing something to them. Suman wrapped it around herself.

"Govind, I'm shivering..." she said.

The boatman threw a tattered sack across one end of the awning to keep out some of the breeze and retired to the bottom of the boat. They could hear him moaning for a while, the everything grew still.

The whole atmosphere was calm and quiet except for the creaking sound of the ropes as the mast swayed in the wind or the muted splash of a small wave splattering against the boat's sides. From time to time an acrid salty stench came wafting in the breeze. The sky was laden with stars and seemed to stretch without end. The faint glow from the heavens illuminated the river bed that lay exposed on either side of the water channel

because of the ebbing tide.

The rear part of the thatched enclosure was open to the wind and Govind sat there gazing at the spectacle nature had unfolded before them. Suman was sleeping by his side. She must be weeping, let me touch her face, let me feel her tears, he thought.

"Go to sleep now, Suman !"

"We've left him so far away...in the middle of all those strangers. Is that a hospital or a jail ! "

"He'll get well soon. Then he'll talk like he used to ... work in the fields ...draw water from the well..."

"Aren't you cold, Govind?"

"No. Go to sleep, now."

Suman didn't quite know what to say. They'd roamed together all day till their legs were fit to break, but now that it was dark they seemed to have turned into strangers. She didn't feel like giving him the whole blanket either. What did that boatman think he was doing, giving them just one plate of gruel, and only one blanket to keep out the cold!

Govind was nodding drowsily as he sat there. He was tired after wandering about all day, but how could he sleep in this cold? She moved to one side to give him some space beneath the awning. "Come, lie down Govind" she said.

Govind curled up on one side hugging his knees. Suman stared at him and all the emotions she had felt for him since their childhood welled up in her heart ...this is my best friend, dearer to me than anyone else I know ... and here he lies shivering in the cold ! Suman crept up to where he lay and threw a part of the blanket across his body. She nestled there by his side, and in a moment she was fast asleep.

The sound of some large bundles being tossed into the boat woke Suman early the next morning. It was still quite dark but the docks were teeming with activity. Sacks of rice were being loaded on to the boat. Shopkeepers from the villages upstream who had come down to replenish their

stocks were loading their purchases too. People travelling to villages that lay upstream were already seated in the boat. Gradually the sky began to lighten.

"The wind had turned ...unfurl the sails ...it's time to leave ..." someone called out.

Suman shook Govind awake quickly and tried to smoothen the creases in her crumpled clothes. The wind rushed into the sails as they were being unfurled and soon the boat was on its way.

Suman carried the two children home from Gokul mavshi's house as soon as they got back. Ramesh had whimpered all night calling for his Bayul mavshi, the woman told her. Suman stepped into her home and was overwhelmed with memories. All she wanted to do was to sit down and cry but the children were hungry and there was not a mouthful of water in the house. She picked up the pot and the rope to draw water from the well as Bai's daughter wailed at the top of her voice ... I can't manage all this any longer! Something has to be done about these two.... now where has their father gone !

Appa had gone out of his mind before the fields were ploughed last year so Suman had begged Vithoba to plough them for her. Vithoba didn't possess any farm tools or bullocks, he worked their plough and bullocks to work on their fields as well as his own and had sowed them for her, too. She hired workers during the hoeing and reaping, working beside them in the fields. All this work, together with that of looking after Bai and appa and the two children almost drove her out of her mind. Yet she was fired with a strange sort of exuberance ... She was doing this for Bai !

The fields hadn't even been ploughed this year and Suman seemed to have lost all interest in them. She got the ridges and the embankments strengthened and fed the bullocks every day, what more can a young girl do on her

own, she thought., But something would have to be done soon. For Bai's children, for appa who would come back and ask why the fields had been left fallow, why the land had been allowed to grow wild.

She went to Vithoba and begged him to plough their fields yet again. The workers take away half the total yield...I'll do everything myself this year, only employ a few people during the reaping and the threshing, she decided.

A woman from Kodibag came to their village now and then. She bought whatever rice and paddy, coconuts and jaggery the villagers could spare and Suman often sold the surplus paddy or coconuts to her. She could buy milk for Bai's daughter with this money.

The infant wailed continuously in fits and starts till it was three months old. It wouldn't stop wailing even after it was fed and finally Suman would begin to cry along with it. No one squandered any extra attention on the poor waif, no one came running to pick it up when it cried. Yet sometimes, in the evening when it began to wail aloud Suman would be overcome with memories of Bai.

"I can't manage any longer, Bai" she would sob, "What can I do? Why did you make me promise to look after them...why did you thrust this on my head?"

The people of the vaddo wondered aloud why Suman took on such a responsibility. Why doesn't she hand the children to whom they belong, just take them to their house and leave them on the door step , they said. Suman knew that no one cared for the children, that there was no one they could depend upon. How could she turn them away from herself, too?

One evening the baby began to wail as dusk fell and continued without pause till late in the night. People stood listening in their door ways and by their windows but no one came forward to comfort the infant or to offer any advice. Everyone is fed up of the child's constant crying, Suman knew.

"A mother's breast is God's gift to an infant, this one yearns to suckle at her breast..."

Suman looked up to see Dasmati by the door. Thin as a reed, this flat-chested childless woman's words hovered in the atmosphere before coming to settle on her heart. Yes! I've heard these words before ...who would understand what they mean more than someone like me and someone like you Dasmati vhanni...?

Everyone in the neighbourhood is fed up of the child's wails. I'm like a mother to it, I must do whatever it takes to make it stop! She went into the house and loosened the buttons of her blouse, one by one. She picked up the wailing infant and held it to her young, virgin breast. The child sucked on the dry nipple for a while as a tickling sensation ran through Suman's body, finally, it fell asleep by her side.

Whenever the child cried without pause after this, forcing her to despair, Suman would go into the depths of her home and hold it to her breast. Sometimes she'd get irritated,

"Cry! Die if you must ..!" she'd snap.

She tried to find out where Manjul's husband was, asking anyone who came from distant villages whether they had met Sridhar, of Hulgey village. If only she could locate the father and hand over the responsibility of looking after the children, she thought.

Krishnanand came rushing down from Panaji just three days after their trip.

"There was a big mix-up. Went with the sahib to take charge of the corpse ....and just couldn't leave till all the work was done. Got back to see that you had already left by jeep...."he explained.

"Did you go to see appa?"

"Yes. Just this morning."

"How is he?"

"The treatment is going on, so he seemed quite confused... but he'll get well. Met a nurse I know, she said he'll have to stay there for a month or slightly more."

"We're depending on you, Bhau....you must look after everything...go see him from time to time..."

"Don't worry, I'll look after everything and when he gets well I'll bring him home. I'll put on my uniform and go and salute the doctor one day, tell him everything."

Suman felt slightly relieved at the thought that appa would soon be back. She'd ask him what they should do with the children. But a new thought struck her all of a sudden. Did appa know about Bai's death, he was already out of his mind at that time. The women of the vaddo told her not to mourn for Bai when he got home, who could say what might happen if he got upset?

It was late in the evening when Krishnanand brought Appa home. Suman wanted to rush up and fling her arms around him, "Our Bai is dead, Appa... ! " she wanted to scream but she did nothing of the sort. She just smiled brightly, gave him a jug of water to wash his hands and feet and led him into the house.

Ramesh stopped playing all of a sudden and stared at him. Bai's daughter Gitu woke up and began to cry. The people of the vaddo drifted in when they heard that Ganesh had come home but no one dared say a word, who knew how much he knew. Sumitra and Yashwant drew Krishnanand aside, does he know, they asked.

"I think he does. The nurse said that he was very upset, kept crying 'My daughter... O my daughter !' for a whole day, that he wouldn't eat properly for some time..."

"Did he ask you anything?"

"In the bus he asked where the children were, whether Manjul's husband had come"

"Now, how did he know all this..?"

"Who knows? Maybe he could make out what was

happening before his eyes..."

"Is he fully recovered, Krishnanand?"

"The doctor said so. They don't let the patient go home, otherwise. They've given medicine for a whole month too."

"Must tell Suman that."

"Why are you so quiet, Ganesh bab? Say something..." Sumitra said, gathering all her courage when they came back to the hall.

"What to say? Just fate! Bai's gone. Now I'll go too."

"But the children are there, Ganesh bab..."

"Who'll take care of them? Dump them on that poor girl's head? I tell you, Sumitra, now all of us must just go and jump into that river!"

"Don't take it to heart...you've just recovered..."

"Or I'll go mad again, you think? Maybe that would be best...won't have to suffer all this...!"

When everyone had gone Suman called her father to eat. "Have the children eaten?"

"Yes. Ramesh ate some rice. I got a tin of milk powder for Gitu when Ratnakar was coming down from Karwar."

"Bayul...sit down here for a while..."

Suman sat down by the door to the middle room. They were both silent for a while.

"Did Bai suffer a lot, Bayul?"

"She'd become very thin. Had high fever, too. But she was conscious till the end."

"Did they take her to a doctor?"

"She wouldn't listen ...but they were going to that day..." "And no one came to take her...from her husband's house..?"

"No."

"Bayul, I could see something happening before my eyes...red hibiscus flowers, white cloth...the bier...as if lots of people had come on a wave of sunlight...but I couldn't understand anything. I understood only later that Bai had gone away..something told me in my heart, Bai has gone!"

Appa began to weep as he spoke but Suman kept a tight rein on her emotions. Suddenly Govind walked into the room,

"How are you, mama?" he asked.

"So ! Took you so long to think of this mama..!"

"I wasn't here.. had gone to Kinnar by cycle. My uncle had vowed to give a bell to the Nirankara temple over there. Went to ask them when we should bring it."

"So what did they say?"

"The temple functionary said to ask someone else. That man said, go ask the priest. The priest was not at home, so..."

"And what does your uncle say?"

"Mama says he'll take the bell and leave it in the temple one day...let them decide what to do with it. Already a year since it's been lying in the house..."

"And why did your uncle make this vow?"

"He said he'd gift a bell to the Lord if I passed the matriculation exam..." Govind was embarrassed.

"How old are you, Govind?"

"Eighteen. Just started the nineteenth year..."

"Yes... Just three months older than Bayul..."

"But she's much smarter than me, mama...."

"What use is that to a woman? The man is like the pillar in the house, the woman like the beam. All the weight falls on the beam, but it is the pillar that everyone talks about. Bayul...get that bottle of coconut oil...my feet are aching."

Suman brought the bottle.

"Here Govind, take a little oil in your palm and rub it on my feet...."

Suman rushed forward, "I'll do that appa" she offered but Ganesh waved her away.

"Krishnanand said that you had taken me to Panaji... I don't remember. Only remember some tall white buildings..."

"That's Altino mama. That's how it looks from Panaji."

Govind was rubbing oil on his feet. Ganesh's heart was filled with emotion. He clasped the youth's oil smeared hands in his own and began to weep. No one spoke for a while. Finally Suman could bear it no longer.

"Eat, appa. You must take your medicine after that" she said. "I don't want any more medicine, my dear. This illness won't go away."

Bai's daughter began to cry loudly in the inner room. Ganesh's eyes flickered for a moment then he glanced away as though he were sick of life itself.

Every morning Ganesh wandered aimlessly past the cattle sheds at the foot of the hillock and the embankments by the fields, but he didn't say a word about what was to be done about the land.

"Appa, what do we do about the fields? I'd told Vithoba bhau to plough them for us."

"It's the month of Magh already and the land is hard and dry. How will he plough it and how will we sow the crop? The other patch is low lying...will be flooded with water. How will we sow the seeds during the rains?

I don't know...don't have the strength or the interest any more. And just ploughing the field won't do. What about all the other work?"

"Last year I got everything done."

"You have to look after two children ...then the work in the fields. You won't manage. And I can't even walk without panting!"

"Shall we let out the land for someone else to till?"

"To whom? They're all scoundrels! They'll cheat us of our share of the crop and then grab the land as well."

"Let's give it out to someone from our vaddo...maybe Pandhari dada will agree"

Ganesh remained silent. The next morning Suman went to Pandhari's house. He was rolling beedies on the porch and his wife was grumbling because he kept

smoking them and coughing without pause. Suman sat down before him leaning against the pillar on the porch.

"What's the matter, Suman?"

"Appa can't work in the fields any longer and I can't manage by myself so we were thinking of letting the fields out..."

Pandhari's wife came and sat beside Suman and Pandhari sidled closer too, but they didn't say a word.

"...if we give them to strangers they may cheat us but our own uncles and cousins won't do that ..dada, will you till our fields?"

"Who has the strength these days? Can't manage what we have ...the educated ones get a job and go away. Only we illiterate fellows work in the fields. Or those men who come back from the army with a pension. I tell you Suman, in another four years all these fields will be left fallow and run wild..."

"That's true, dada, but tell me this, will you till our fields? If our uncles look after them they will remain in good condition..."

"Yes. This land belonged to our ancestors. Mustn't let it run wild... but tell me what part of the harvest will you expect?"

"The villagers give four khandis of yield for every khandi of paddy that is sown..."

"Those are old rates. Who's ready to slog in the fields, now? And the yield isn't as good as it used to be. I'll give three khandis of yield for every khandi sown."

"All right, do whatever you think is fair."

"How big are the fields?"

"There's a patch by the tamarind where two khandis of paddy are sown. The low lying fields will take ten kudavs of seeds and the field by the old mango will take a khandi and half. Four Khandis altogether.?

"What about that other patch?"

"That patch I'll work on, myself. Get someone to plough it for me. Or I'll dig it up with a spade."

"Smart girl, you are, Suman ! Kept the field that is nearest to the vaddo for yourself ! Also the one with the highest yield" Pandhari smiled.

"The patch by the tamarind is also very good, you know that, dada!"

"But it's quite far."

"That's why I'm letting it out. Just keep the land clean and free..."

"Haven't you seen our fields? You won't find a single weed or clump of wild grass growing on our land!" Pandhari's wife was angry at her words.

The woman's hair was wild and unkempt as though it had not been touched by oil for a month and her sari was dirty and smelly, too. She worked very hard but there was nothing clean or neat about her appearance. Pandhari, however, was an awesome figure with a huge moustache and a pair of hard, scheming eyes that made his face fearful to behold.

As Suman crossed through their court yard a dried palm frond fell to the ground. The hard midriff missed her body but the fronds brushed over her .

"Did the frond fall on you?" Pandhari's wife called out at once.

"Yes mavshi The frond brushed over me."

"Then it must be set alight. Take hold of the edge and drag it to the open field..."

"How do I set it alight?"

Pandhari's wife went into the kitchen and brought a live coal in an iron pan. Suman took it and dragged the frond away. "What a nice frond that was. Pity it had to be burnt like this !"Pandhari said to himself.

Ganesh refused to take his medicines. He would wander aimlessly as though he were sick of life, otherwise he'd sit silently in the hall. Sometimes he'd play with the children and become so emotional that it seemed he would begin to cry.

"Bayul, won't Bai's husband ever come back?" he would ask, his voice quavering as though he were cold.

"What can I say, appa?"

"Then what will happen to the children?"

"They're here, now, aren't they?"

"But what about your future? You're a mother of two even before you are wed ...where will you leave them when you get married some day?"

Suman had nothing to say to that, and appa would turn silent and morose too. Then Suman would begin to worry,

"Take your medicine, appa" she would plead.

"There's no energy left, Bayul...what use are medicines to me? You think I'll go mad again? Who says I'm well now?"

Appa had come home just before the full moon night in Magh. The month of Chaitra was over and Vaishakh had just begun. It was difficult to say whether he had fully recovered from his illness; he spoke coherently, so it was believed that he was well. The rains were late this year and Ganesh, like the trees and plants around him, seemed to be withering in the scorching heat. Suman would often have to lead him home from some patch of shade where he had taken refuge at the height of noon.

One day he called out to Rama,

"Ram bab, am thinking of getting my younger one married this year. Any wretched fellow clad in rags will do..."

Ram bab stared at him for a moment.

"The rains haven't started in time...otherwise the fields would have been full of muddy water. Not a time for weddings, certainly. There are two young children by her side. Do something about them, first ..." Rama slipped away.

"Bayul, my dear, no music was played when Bai was taken away. But it will begin to play now..."

Suman stared at him aghast.

"Govind performed Bai's last rites. Now he'll have to perform mine too. The whole vaddo is just waiting, fire in hand, to cremate me. But only Govind can light my pyre...!"

Suman's eyes began to swim with tears. Avdu ajji kept saying to all who would listen,

"This wretched girl interfered in the Ghadi's rituals and caused this whole mess ! Someone go and beg him to come back..!" When Suman took the rice water to the bullocks in the shed the next afternoon she was shocked to see them loose. Who could have taken the rope that bound them to the stake, she wondered. Appa comes to the shed sometimes, where was he now?

"Chandu, did you see appa? I've let out the fields... there's no more work for you two..." she muttered as she went to the courtyard and stared out over the blazing fields. Suddenly she saw two men running towards the vaddo, they seemed to be carried on a tide of bright sunlight. What could it be that makes them rush about so, she wondered.

The two men spoke to someone in the alley. Then, five or six men from the vaddo joined them and the whole group rushed towards the river. Suman's heart began to quake... What sort of calamity was this, was it a fire somewhere, or had some boat capsized? Govind, where are you, why don't you go and see..?

Four or five women were trying to comfort Suman... they seem so far away as though they are treading through that pitch black darkness that existed at the beginning of time... but why do they seem like strangers, who has taken the kumkum from their foreheads, the flowers from their hair? My mother and my sister died when their husbands were alive, with all the symbols of marriage intact, why do you approach me as widows, now?

"Suman, dear, don't take this to heart. Be strong! Your father hanged himself from a tree by the river..."

"Suman dear, listen ! Your father hanged himself

from a tree by the river..."

"But mavshi, doesn't my mother have to be here at this moment? Someone go and fetch my Aai and make her sit there beside appa. Take the symbols of marriage off from her body, now that appa is dead ! But let me see them side by side, just once ! How Bai used to talk about aai, about the kumkum on her forehead, the flowers in her hair. The women in my house die before their husbands do, Govind! I'll die before you too ! Go now, see if there's any warmth in appa's body still...!

Ganesh committed suicide, so, according to the law, the police should have been informed at once. But the people of the vaddo swept into action. They took down the body and started preparing to cremate it.

"Never mind if we get arrested tomorrow, but we won't let the police touch Ganesh bab's corpse. They will carry the body away and cut it up ! And the whole village gets a bad name!" Sadashiv exclaimed.

"Yes ! When Soyru's daughter-in-law Shobha died the police returned the body only after three days. No one could light a fire in the hearth for three whole days! We had to cook rice gruel in the court yard to feed the children!"

"How can you even drink water without completing the cremation rituals?"

"And when they did return the body, the stomach was cut open!"

Narshinv performed the last rites. The men of the vaddo did whatever was necessary and Suman remained disinterested, as though the rituals had nothing to do with her. She wanted to sit quietly and mourn for appa, she had begun to plumb the depths of despair. How would she ever recover from this tragedy, she wondered.

When the boy said 'Bayul mavshi, I'm hungry !' she merely stared at him with vacant eyes. When the little girl

began to scream someone came and carried her away but Suman didn't budge from her seat.

My childhood was wonderful, with Bai around, but when she got married I jumped straight into old age. Who knows where I left my youth? Suddenly Suman wondered if her hair had turned grey, if her body had become a mass of wrinkles!

When did I become an adolescent, when did I get my first period...? I didn't cry, overwhelmed by affection, for no loving aunt drew me to the bath room to give me a ritual bath. No one sprinkled turmeric water and dung water on my body. How stealthily youth crept upon me, and how quickly it passed away!

When Govind sat beside me the women of the vaddo whispered "Young girls shouldn't sit close to men...!" That's all! How were they to know that, but for him, I'd have turned as old and wizened as Avdu ajji long, long ago!

Tradition demanded that the niece visit her maternal uncle's house when the mourning rituals were completed on the thirteenth day after her father's death.

"Mama, let's take the children along..."

"It won't look nice..."

"Then where will they stay?"

"At a neighbor's place...."

"No, mama. I won't go without them."

"But you must come to your mother's family... you can't stay in this house tonight! Tradition demands this..." her uncle explained but Suman was adamant. Finally he washed the children's faces and dressed them in clean clothes. With one youngster perched on his shoulder and the other in his arms they set off.

Suman's uncle looked after them with great affection for two days and gave them five measures of rice when they returned home. His wife was very sickly and he had five small daughters to care for, so though he wanted to do much more for his niece, circumstances kept him in check.

The rains set in within a fortnight after Ganesh died and people busied themselves in the fields. Oxen were drawing ploughs in every patch of land and cries of "Arrr... aaarrr... aaa... papppaaa... rrraaa...ammmm...haiiiiiiii." echoed in the air as they urged the animals on.

Suman had decided to till one of the fields herself. Chandu, the bullock was old, now, but Buddho was young and strong. Suman rejoiced in his strong frame, his upright horns and the tawny colour of his skin but people advised her to sell the animals at once.

"You've let out the fields... why do you need the animals now? You'll have to give them food and water and tend to them during the rains..."

Suman didn't know what to do. Anyone would pay a good amount for Buddho but what about Chandu? He'd been working on their land for ten years now, his body was bent and weary and his neck was a mass of soft folds.

Vithobha came to her house one day.

"Suman, the rains have set in and there's so much work. It's late already...I was so upset when Ganesh bab died that I couldn't bear to come...Let me take the bullocks and plough the fields, then we can sow them at once."

Suman stared at him in silence. She had thought he was a simple garrulous soul who meant no harm to anyone, so for the last two years she had let him take the bullocks and plough his own fields along with her own. However, Vithobha turned out to be a wily character who merely pretended to be dim-witted when the occasion suited him. He used Suman's oxen to plough the other fields in the village for a price. Once, he even stopped ploughing mid-way, insisting that Suman pay him two rupees for the time he had spent in strengthening the embankments that bordered her land.

"Vithobha bhau, I've let out the land."

"But there's that patch which you're going to till..I'll plough that for you"

This man will plough my tiny patch, then he'll plough

his own and that of other's too, Suman thought.

"Chandu's old now, Vithobha bhau, he can't work in the mud any more."

"Rubbish, my dear! That bull has strong bones. He'll manage another year without any trouble."

"I'm not letting the animals out."

"Will your field remain fallow, then?"

"Let's see. But I'm not giving those animals to anyone."

"They're bullocks...animals ...not sacks of rice to pile up in the house" Let the fields go fallow and let the animals roam without work! You'll be getting married in the future...who knows what sort of husband you'll get..." Vitobha grumbled as he walked away.

Suman wondered what she would do with the land. If it remained fallow people would laugh, Ganesh is dead and the land into which he poured his sweat is reduced to this state! No! I can't let that happen, she vowed.

The pick axe and spade, halter and plough and all the other implements which appa used in the fields were lying about the house. I'll use them now, Suman decided. Salu ajji always said she was the first woman in the village to set hands on a plough!

"Sit here by Gitu's side and look after her. I'm going to the fields" Suman said to Ramesh early the next morning.

"Come back soon, Bayul mavshi. Or give me the milk... I'll feed Gitu" the youngster offered.

Suman marvelled at how mature the four year old boy had suddenly become. He wouldn't go out to play with the other children, merely hovering about his sister's bed. Whenever she cried he'd rush to Suman and tug at her skirt.

Suman placed the cross bar across the bullock's shoulders and slipped the halter around their necks but she had no idea how the metal teeth that dug into the ground were to be attached to this contraption. She assembled them

somehow and urged the bullocks forward, "Arr... arrr... aaa....haaaiiiii ...." she called.

The animals moved forward at once but the metal teeth got embedded in the ground leaving furrows that were crooked and uneven. After a while the animals began to move haphazardly as the plough got entangled with their legs. Suman unyoked them and stood there quietly wondering what to do.

"Suman! You're ploughing the field!"

Suman didn't know if Govind had stumbled on her accidentally as he passed by or if he had come there to look for her, but she was relieved to see him, "Yes. But this isn't fixed properly..." She replied, almost in tears. He took hold of the plough and inspected it.

"How tightly you've assembled the whole thing...no wonder the metal part remains erect! The bullocks will have to strain forward and their shoulders will swell up at once!"

Govind untied the ropes that held the contraption together and showed Suman how to assemble it correctly.

"Are you really going to plough the field?" he asked, amazed.

Suman asked him to show her how to guide the plough and as she placed her hands on his, they moved forward down the length of the field.

"Now guide it yourself" Govind said moving away. "There are two ploughs working in my mama's fields, I only went home to fetch the seeds ...then I saw you here. But girls mustn't plough the field..! Look, even the men have stopped work to watch !"

Suman smiled wryly as the animals moved forward at will, pretending not to notice Khushali and Vishnu and Keshav who were gathered on one side.

"Suman, stop!" one of them called out, but by the time she managed to do so the animals had wandered crookedly to the edge of the field.

"What's taken possession of you! An unmarried girl...

tearing open the heart of the earth!" Keshav exclaimed.

"A vaddo full of men around, yet you set hands on the plough! That's never happened in this clan before...!" Vishnu was indignant.

"But Salu ajji used to plough the field, anna."

"She was a widow at the time... but you're not even married! There's so much of life ahead. Any woman who tears its heart open is cursed by the Earth ... her womb remains fallow, she cannot bear a child!"

Suman sank down by the edge of the field with a woe begone face.

"What can I do, then, how will I till this field? Bai has left two little ones, what will I feed them?"

"Get someone to plough it for you."

"Get whom? People demand five rupees to strengthen the embankments, ten rupees to plough. All of you spill tears, 'Suman, poor thing, how much you suffer' you say. But not one of you can do anything to help. Sadashiv anna, you brought a load of wood to cremate appa, didn't you? Mavshi was demanding money for that, the other day!"

"She's mad. Don't worry about that..." Sadashiv was embarrassed.

"We're saying this for your good... the plough is a demon's tool, not for women to lay hands upon...!"

Suman had noticed from her very childhood that the people of the vaddo were good at heart and always willing to help. They'd stay awake at nights when someone was ill and do all the work at a wedding or a funeral as though they were working in their own homes.

Yet they'd argue and fight bitterly over every inch of land and over the stone boundaries of the fields. If someone borrowed a measure of rice they'd be at their doorstep the next day urging them to return it, if someone wanted a live coal they'd be unwilling to give them any more, not even an iron pan to carry it off in!

Suman sat by the field immersed in thought. The

bullocks were moving restlessly as though to say, get on with the work, now, or let us loose! She got up at last and laid her hands on the plough. Pressing the metal deep into the earth she lashed the bullock's flanks with a stick and they set off again. The furrows they left in their wake were crooked and untidy but they managed to plough two square portions of the field.

Suddenly she realised that the sun was high overhead and that the children were all by themselves. She quickly unyoked the animals and carried the tools home on her head. The women of the vaddo had been bustling about in her courtyard all morning but no one had the courage to say anything to her face. Only Gokul mavshi stood at her window passing sarcastic comments in a loud voice.

It was a small patch of land and Suman managed to plough it lengthwise and breadthwise twice in the space of a week. Ram dada helped her sow the land. She didn't even try to smoothen the surface of the land after it was sown, merely tossing back some soil to cover the seeds. But all this came to an end that very year.

During the rainy season Chandu slipped on the hill side and broke a leg. Suman rushed there when the cow herd came with the news but the animal was in pain and couldn't get up. She begged the men of the vaddo to carry him to the shed but they refused.

"His leg is broken. We'll have to tie ropes to his legs and bind stakes to them if we are to carry him on our heads... that's not possible. Take food and water to him where he lies...he won't live long, anyway."

Suman carried a bale of hay and a pot of water to the bullock every day. He'd drink some water but he barely touched the hay. One day she saw a pack of vultures circling the area where he lay. They were pouncing on his body and tearing at his flesh.

Chandu was a mild animal, he'd been in their shed for the last ten or twelve years. He never shook his horns menacingly when they slipped the halter about his neck

nor did he wander away when he was yoked to the plough. As a child Suman had spent so many happy hours draped over his soft, quilt like neck, or darting in and out under his belly and between his legs.

They sold Buddho off in the month of Karthick. Her uncle brought a customer from Kerwadi who paid four hundred rupees for the animal. He'd turned lonely and sullen since Chandu died and would wander about aimlessly refusing to enter the cow shed. And what a poor shed it was! It had not been repaired the previous year and the roof was beginning to leak.

Suman felt no pangs of regret as she passed the rope tied around Buddho's neck to his new master. This fine animal will work in someone's field instead of wandering about uselessly, she thought as she watched it tossing its horns proudly like the ceremonial bullock that is attached to the temple chariot on a festive day.

When the harvest was over Pandhari brought twelve khandis of paddy to Suman's house. He poured the grain on the floor and went away. The field that Suman had tilled also yielded some ten or twelve khandis of grain. After distributing a khandi or two amongst the workers who had reaped and threshed the grain she stored the rest in large bins.

She had no use for the plough and the other implements any longer so she stored them in the loft and worked with a spade and pickaxe. She'd go to the field morning and evening and come back home in between to tend to the children. She'd dig up every bit of land and sow the seeds herself, but she wouldn't let it turn fallow, she vowed.

Suman was fair and pretty and had become quite plump with the first flush of youth but these days the endless responsibilities that weighed her down had made her lose a lot of weight. She was still attractive but the maternal instincts that had been aroused in her made her seem mature and wizened beyond her age and the way

she spoke and behaved was hardly that of a twenty year old.

Bai's daughter was one and a half years old now and the boy was almost five. Govind had once again become the dear friend of her childhood, there was no fear or embarrassment left in their relationship. The last two years had seen many crises in her life and each time Govind would come and sit by her side to comfort her and to help in whatever way he could. Their friendship seemed so natural and easy that people no longer commented on it. They knew that Suman was her own mistress now, and was capable of looking after herself. If she could single-handedly bring up two young children she didn't need their advice !

Govind would sit in her house and converse with her as she went about her daily chores. Sometimes she'd come and sit before him but they would steer clear of all talk of love or marriage. It was only sometimes that Govind would blurt,

"Won't mama and mami agree to our marriage Suman?"

"I don't know, Govind" she would mutter drawing closer to him, placing her hand firmly in his. Am I holding my dear love's hand or is this the hand of an innocent child, she often wondered. But Govind's mami was very watchful and if he was late in getting home she'd begin to call out to him and he would have to rush off.

Pandhari gave her two khandis less than the agreed amount after the harvest the following year.

"The ears of grain formed well enough on the plants but much of it was hollow and of poor quality. It was an evil wind that destroyed the crop" he said.

But people said Pandhari had a very good harvest. Suman didn't know what to do. If she took the fields away from him who knew if someone else would agree to till them, if they didn't the fields would remain fallow. Better accept what he gives quietly, why get into a fight with this

unscrupulous man, she thought.

One evening while Suman was busy at the grinding stone in the hall the children who were playing noisily in the court yard suddenly fell silent. For a moment Suman didn't recognise the man hovering by the door, then

"Bhavoji! When did you come? Where were you all this time?" she exclaimed.

Suman brought the children and seated them before him. "This is your father. Ramesh, say 'Baba' .....you'll be staying with him from now on."

He sat there with his head bowed, not saying a word. His clothes were old and dirty and his mud splattered pair of slippers stood by the door. His face was swollen and he looked unkempt, not having shaved for a week. His eyes were rheumy and surrounded by dark shadows.

"When did you hear the news Bhavoji...? You haven't even seen the little one, Gitu...she was born six or seven months after you left!"

"What happened to Manjul?" His voice was cracked and hoarse.

"She kept pining for you. Till the end. Lay there with her eyes trained on the river..."

Suman thought he would burst into tears in a moment but his eyes were blank and dry. He gave Ramesh a packet of biscuits which he drew out of his bag but when he tried to touch Gitu she began to cry.

Her brother-in-law seemed to be in dire straits but Suman was delighted to see him she didn't know why. She made rice and bhakris, a prawn curry and another one with shell fish that night. She heated water for his bath and gave him one of appa's new dhotis to wear. She watched him push the food about on his plate, barely eating a morsel - he is weighed down with memories of Bai, poor man, she thought.

"Where were you, Bhavoji, all this time? Why didn't you write, at least?"

"In Mumbai."

"Do you have a job? A place to stay?"

"Yes."

She made his bed out in the hall and laid the children down beside him while she prepared to sleep in the kitchen but Ramesh made such a fuss that she had to take him along, too. She didn't sleep a wink that night. A load of worries seemed to press on her mind as memories of her sister surfaced again and again. Bai's foot steps had begun to echo in the house ever since Bhavoji arrived. I'll hand the children to Bhavoji and be free...let him do what he pleases, they're his children after all, she thought happily.

But then she began to feel guilty and drew Ramesh close. She loved the children dearly and would miss them when they went away. She could hear her brother-in-law tossing and turning in his bed... So he couldn't get to sleep either!

Suman scrubbed all his clothes and washed them well the next day. She also washed the children's clothes and set them to dry on a rope tied between two palms. He sat silently in the hall as the women of the vaddo slipped into the court yard and whispered and gesticulated amongst themselves. Only Sumitra came and sat down before him.

"What's done is done. No point getting upset about that...you have to look after the children from now on. Suman's whole life lies ahead, she's been tied down because of the children" she said.

Four days passed in this fashion with Sridhar saying not a word about his plans. He'd eat and drink and sit there in silence. One day he went to the barber's shop and got himself shaved. He brought some food for the children, some tea and sugar and a sweet smelling cake of soap when he returned.

"Bhavoji, did you go home?"

"Yes."

"How's your father?"
"Can't get up from his bed."
"Who looks after him, then?"
"My sister comes every morning..."
"Who? Sumati vhanni?"
"Yes"

Suman's heart seemed to fill with despair.

One evening he went for a walk and returned very late, smelling of drink. Now where did he get liquor in this village, Suman wondered uncomfortably. Shiddar got its name from the 'siddha purush' or holy men so not a drop of liquor was ever brought or drunk within its limits, anyone guilty of doing so would come to no good, people believed.

Once, when some outsider had got drunk and created a ruckus people had beaten him up and thrown him out of the village. Perhaps he had taken a boat and crossed to Ambe juvo, the island in the middle of the river, they said liquor was available there, Suman thought.

She served dinner in silence and when Ramesh refused to sleep beside him she slapped the child soundly.

"Won't sleep by your father...want your mavshi, do you? Think she's dead! She died along with your mother...!"

The next evening he took the children out for a while. Little Gitu was perched on his shoulder while Ramesh walked along clutching his finger asking all sorts of questions. Suman was happy to see them together, he would take the children away soon... She scolded herself for worrying about where he would keep them, they're his children, let him do what he pleases, she thought.

"Suman, I'm going tomorrow" he said one day.
"Where will you go?"
"To Mumbai"
"Why don't you stay in Hulgey?"
"No. The fields have been barren for two years...I

won't work in them any more."

"All right. Do what you want. But take your children with you."

Sridhar didn't say a word so Suman continued,

"How long can I look after them? The fields are being tilled by other people... I eat whatever they give. I have to sell grain to pay for your daughter's milk...take them! Take them with you! Leave me to my fate.... let me get married, or let me die...no one has to worry about that!"

"The children are very attached to you....they're very young....can't stay apart..."

"Bhavoji, I've told you I won't keep them here!"

"Let's all go to Mumbai. Appa isn't here any more ... who'll take care of you?"

Suman realised that he had some plan up his sleeve. She stared at him suspiciously.

"And what will I do there? Be your servant?" she snapped.

"No, no! The children are there... what's wrong if I marry my sister-in-law?" he asked hesitantly.

Suman was sizzling with anger but like a red hot piece of iron cools down when water is poured upon it, she forced herself to calm down.

"Drove your wife to death because of drink...now sell your sister-in-law for the stuff!" she said in low tones.

"I drank just once in these seven days...I'll stop! Won't drink ever again..."

"I don't want to hear any more. Tomorrow, I'll bring the children to the boat and put them in with you!"

Suman set to work at once. She went to the shop and bought some moong and some jaggery. She roasted the moong, ground it to powder and mixed it with the moist jaggery to make some forty odd laddoos, her hands trembling all the while. Her heart was heavy as she gathered the children's clothes and stuffed them into a bag. There were two hundred rupees left over from what she had received for the bullock, she decided to place a hundred

rupees in Ramesh's hands when they went away.

She took the children to her bed that night and gathering them close cried herself to sleep. She woke with a start when she felt someone's heavy hand roving over her body. A man was standing by her bed, he seemed tall and heavy set as though he had wrapped a blanket about himself. She realised that it was her brother-in-law, but she was not afraid.

"Bhavoji, what are you doing here?" she demanded.

"How will I manage the children by myself?" his tone was subdued.

"Don't go to Mumbai, then. Go stay in Hulgey."

"If you come with me I'll go anywhere."

Suman was beside herself with rage. She grabbed him tightly by the arms and shoved him on to his bed. His arms were weak and flabby, drink had ruined his health. For a moment she was aghast, was this the man Bai had wasted her life pining for?

She couldn't get to sleep again till it was almost daybreak. When she awoke the next day her brother-in-law was not in his bed. His clothes were not hanging on the peg and the battered suitcase was gone. She collapsed on the ground in a daze. Some five or six ten rupee notes were piled on the threshold. Suman began to wail,

"Ramesh! Child! Your Baba has slunk away leaving you behind!"

Govind had gone home to Asnoti eight days ago and hadn't returned as yet. Suman was beside herself with anxiety as she hovered by the eastern wall staring at his uncle's house, was he there by the door, or in the hall or could she spot him somewhere on the upper floor?

Sometimes she'd stand in the alley staring towards the river, her spirits perking up when she saw someone approach, then dipping again when she realised that it was not Govind. He'd promised to be back in three or four

days, it was already eight days since he had gone. She didn't dare go and ask anyone at Bhaskar anna's place, all her courage seemed to have vanished after Bhavoji went away.

Sometimes she wondered why she waited .... for Govind like this, was it because he was a good friend, or because he was the man she hoped to marry some day? He was like some rare treasure that she yearned to possess, but the serpent that guarded the treasure kept her away. I want Govind to be mine, she thought, but star-crossed creature that I am, I have two children to care for even before I'm married! How can I take them with me to Bhaskar anna's house? As for Govind.... he's a bigger coward than I am, how can we even think of defying society and living our own lives!

Bai you were like a mother to me. Now I play mother to your children so I have to sacrifice Govind... but Bai, bless me, let Govind fall to my lot!

Suman felt quite nervous when she thought of Govind's home at Asnoti and of his three elder brothers who came to help Bhaskar anna during the harvest. Tall and thick set with loud booming voices, they reaped the plants and threshed the paddy all through the night. Govind looked like a boy before them. Slim and fair with clear black eyes, he was twenty two years old but he still seemed innocent and childish.

A sweet perfume seemed to spread all over the vaddo when she heard that Govind had returned. But why am I so happy? What sort of mess is this that I am in?

"Aai isn't well. She was in the hospital at Karwar for four days. Coughs and gasps for breath... Can't eat well" he explained.

"What did the doctor say?"

"Nothing. Gave some medicine. But mama came to see her that day. She said 'Do what you have to about Govind when I am still alive'."

"And what does your mama want to do?"

"Who knows?"

Suman began to tremble all of a sudden.

"Govind...suppose your uncle wants to get you married to someone else, what will you do?"

"I'll say that I've decided to marry you."

"And if he refuses.... then?"

"I won't marry anyone else."

Suman was filled with happiness at his words but the fear that had taken root in her heart refused to go away.

It was now three years since Pandhari had started tilling their fields. This time he gave her only eight khandis of paddy, two khandis less than the previous year.

"We slog in the fields, wear our bodies down to the bone and you sit there in comfort enjoying the fruit? What wretched fields these are...sowed twelve khandis of grain altogether and got barely thirteen!"

"Never mind all that...you don't have to till our fields next year. I'll let them out to someone else."

"Someone else? I'll see who dares set foot in those fields!"

Suman was amazed at his words, why was he behaving like this? The ground seemed to slip way from under her feet as people told her what had happened. Pandhari had filed a report with the clerk in the land office that he was tilling these fields. Having tilled them for three years at a stretch he had filed an application that the land be transferred to his name.

Suman and Narshinv rushed to the land office the next day. "He's been tilling those fields all this time...that's what's written in the records," the Clerk said.

"He said that ..and you entered it into the records, just like that?" Narshinv countered.

"He produced witnesses... the men who farmed the surrounding fields."

"What can we do now?"

"Very little. The law favours those who till the land. You can go to the court and fight a case ...but there's not much hope. It's a fact that he's tilled the land for three years."

Suman lost her temper at this. She accused the clerk of having been bribed by Pandhari but there was little they could do. The only thing left was to summon a meeting of the village elders and to place the problem before them.

Suman went to each house in the vaddo and told every one how Pandhari was seeking to rob her of her land. They were sympathetic and advised her to complain to the village elders, but each man knew that the law would favour the one who tilled the soil. This was how they had got their land in the first place, how the Brahmin landlords had been forced to hand over hundreds of acres, to vacate their holdings in the villages and move to distant Mumbai.

The men of the vaddo gathered around the tulsi plant in the village square at dusk and Keshav went to summon Pandhari.

"The government will decide what happens. This doesn't concern any of you" Pandhari declared.

"But Suman is one of us... the land belonged to our ancestors, it was divided amongst us long ago."

"But was it divided fairly, I ask? Then how did I get such a small patch, where I can only sow three khandis of grain while Bhaskar sows twelve khandis and Nilu sows ten?

When our fathers and grandfathers were in trouble these people's ancestors bought the land at throw away prices ...and Keshav, think I don't know how you cheated appu Shenai of that three khandi patch by the Sanvri tree? You'd tell him to go and take his share of the harvest from the government, each time he came down from Karwar! Poor fellow! Wore out his shoes ...now he's gone to live in Mumbai with his daughter and the land is your's!"

Ram dada came to call him after that and then Yashwant

came, but they couldn't make him budge. There was no weight to their arguments for each of them had benefited by these new laws, each man had grabbed a share of land that belonged to the Brahmin landlords who had been forced to move to Mumbai.

Suman had been simmering with rage all this while. Finally she went to summon Pandhari to the meeting, herself.

"Tell them I won't come" he declared.

"Robbing me of my land! Won't do you any good, I tell you....I've slogged three years in those fields. Given you a share of the harvest, too."

"You sinner! I gave you the land to till...didn't dream you'd do this..."

"Get away from my door! And what do you want that land for? To carry on your head when you get married?"

Suman was so full of rage that she began to curse Pandhari, all the foulest words she had heard since child-hood spewed forth in a torrent from her lips. The man stepped forward angrily as she picked up a stone to fling at him.

"Don't act too virtuous ...you slut ! Lying around with Bhaskar's nephew..."

"Yes I'll sleep with him! What's that to you..?"

"Thrown shame to the winds, you...!"

Someone rushed forward and dragged Suman away. All the men and women of the vaddo had gathered in each other's court yards and they were talking animat-edly.

"Does he want to make a beggar of her... poor orphan that she is..."

"He's her father's cousin, too!"

"But surely she shouldn't have abused him like that!"

Govind was on the porch with the children when she got home. Suman went in without a word and slumped down in the hall. Devki mavshi came in and set a lamp alight.

"See how much trouble she is in, Govind? Say something to her ..." she urged.

Govind sat there in silence as the younger child fell asleep and Ramesh snuggled up to his aunt. Finally he said,

"Don't cry, Suman Just keep quiet. Let him take the fields. You won't starve."

His aunt had been calling out to him for quite some time but he had ignored her all this while. Finally he shouted "Coming, mami..." and walked away.

Ramesh was dozing by her side but Suman didn't move. In a little while she heard footsteps by the door and Govind and his aunt Sarasvati walked in. Sarasvati placed a brass vessel full of rice and some curry before her.

"Get up, Suman. Eat" she said.

Suman wanted to throw her arms-around the woman and burst into tears but Sarasvati seemed nervous, her voice barely a whisper. She'd crept in silently and in a moment she was gone taking Govind with her.

Bhaskar had been to Karwar at least three times during the last week. He took the launch which touched the pier at nine every morning, dressed in a sparkling white dhoti and shirt with a black cap on his head. The old practice of winding red silk scarves about their heads had given way to black caps, but most men chose to be bare headed except on auspicious occasions when they wound a towel about their scalps.

Everyone knew that Bhaskar was going to Karwar, to meet the Lawyer Pavaskar but no one knew what they discussed. One day Ratnakar, who worked in the law office at Karwar came to the vaddo.

"Bhaskar dada wants to adopt his nephew legally... he's getting the papers ready" he said.

The news spread through the vaddo in moments. Sadashiv's wife Vishranti dropped in at Bhaskar's house.

After making small talk and helping herself to the paan that was offered she said, "Is it true what we're hearing, do you mean to legally adopt Govind as your son?"

Sarasvati was a simple woman, she blurted out the truth. "Yes. That's why my husband goes to Karwar. When the official papers are ready we'll have the religious ceremony and adopt him as our son."

Actually, there was nothing new in this. Like the interest generated when news spreads of a young girl's marriage being fixed, everyone wanted to know more. For one thing, this was a celebration in Bhaskar's house — friends and relatives from distant places would gather here and there would be feasting and merry making. For another, Govind was everyone's nephew, everyone in the vaddo cared for him.

Suman was happy to hear about this but it made little difference to Govind himself. He'd always lived in his mama's house, he'd continue to do so.

The only one struck by the importance of this development was Sumitra — Arrey, if Bhaskar bab adopts Govind legally and performs the adoption rituals the boy will be like his own son and will take his name, too. If Govind is Bhaskar's son he'll be like a brother to Suman! Now why didn't I think of this before! Suman is young, she hasn't thought of all this, and the people of the village can't be bothered about her marriage. But I've always rejoiced in seeing them together, thought of how they'll get married some day, why didn't I think of this problem before?

Now Sumitra was faced with a new dilemma -should she talk to Suman and Govind about this? They were both so young, they probably didn't understand the situation yet, but once the ceremony was performed and they realised what it meant who could tell what they would do? They might even take their own lives... She thought.

Suman was playing with Manjul's little daughter in

the hall when Sumitra walked in.

"Gitu's three now, isn't she?"

"Yes, Kaki. Turned three at the Tulsi festival the other day."

"Where's Ramesh?"

"In school. He's in the first standard."

"How big the children have grown! Doesn't seem as though it's three years since Manjul passed away...!"

Suman was silent for a while.

"Ram dada's new radio works very well, doesn't it? We can hear it right here..." She said.

"It's new . That's why they play it so loud...I'd have turned it down. The Janata Party members were going to take Indira Gandhi to jail but more than a lakh of people came to stop them it seems..."

"They said that on the radio....?"

"Yes"

Suman was astonished.

"Haven't seen Govind around ...doesn't he come here these days..?"

"Sometimes. Must be busy with his uncle's affairs..." Suman was suddenly shy.

"Do the two of you plan to get married...?"

Suman looked up at the woman but she didn't say a word.

"....Bhaskar bab's going to adopt him."

"Let him."

"What do you mean, let him? If Bhaskar bab adopts Govind then he'll be like his own son. Which means he'll be like a brother to you..."

Suman felt like someone had suddenly withdrawn all support and left her hanging in mid air. She forgot all about modesty and decorum,

"What will we do now, Kaki?" she gasped.

"What can I say? You have to decide ...if Govind remains firm anything is possible."

The flood gates seemed to have opened and Suman's

turbulent emotions came pouring out.

"We love each other very much, Kaki, he's my childhood friend, I feel restless if I don't see him for one day! I want him...we'll get married.. or I'll kill myself1 He hasn't touched me kaki...we've been waiting to get married...I love him very much, he wants to marry me too!"

Sumitra stared in amazement at the girl, her love and pride reflected in her eyes.

"Fate decides what sort of a husband a girl will get... look at me, now. If someone had said I'd land up here when I was a child I'd have given them a piece of my mind!"

"Good or bad, what does it matter? Can you leave your husband because he's bad? You have to act, both of you, a third person can't interfere in this. Will the people of the vaddo go to Bhaskar bab to seek an alliance for you?"

Suman remained restless throughout that day. Why didn't Govind come? She went to the eastern wall and stared at his uncle's house, at the increased activity, the hustle and bustle. When he finally dropped in that afternoon his face was drawn and worried.

"What's the matter, Govind?"

"Mama used to forbid me to come to your house all this time, now Mami does the same! That's all they've been saying these last four days."

"Why?"

"I don't know...they're not saying anything..."

"They're going to adopt you as their son."

"So what? As if I wasn't like their son all this time."

"It's not like that Govind...once they adopt you legally and once the rituals are over you'll be like their son ...so you'll be like a brother to me. How can a brother and a sister get married?"

Govind was shocked into silence.

"You make up your mind, Govind, I'll not object. But I tell you, I won't live without you!"

Govind stared deeply into her eyes, they had known each other for ages, yet Suman felt that his innocent childish gaze had suddenly turned strong and mature.

"You wanted to take me in your arms that day, on the hillock, didn't you?" Suman asked.

"Yes. I would have. But we didn't get up to the top."

"We'd have lost our way amidst those trees and bushes."

"Would have been better that way. Could have gone off somewhere and lived together..and that Ghangre rock was right there to show us the way."

A hint of childishness still lurked in Govind's eyes. Suman was scared.

"Govind, will you let them adopt you? What have you decided?" she blurted out as he got up in a huff and moved away. "Do whatever you want..I won't say anymore."

She had passed on the responsibility of taking a decision to someone else for the first time in her life. Suman suddenly felt free.

This was the first time that an adoption ceremony was being celebrated in the village. Bhaskar's house was the hub of all activity, there were meetings with the priest, with those responsible for the festive meals, the invitations and so much more. Bhaskar told anyone who dropped in about his plans and they always responded with warmth, 'Govind is a good boy, the household will flourish' they said.

Govind hovered about the house silently, no one had even asked him for his opinion on the subject. So much wealth and property is being thrust into his hands, what objection can he possibly have, people thought. Only his mami understood his predicament but she didn't say anything.

Govind began to suspect that his uncle and aunt must have planned this whole thing together, his mami was no

longer on his side or why would she keep telling him to stop seeing Suman?

One day his eldest brother came from Asnoti bearing fruits from their orchard. He peeled and sliced some fruit and offered it to Govind. He spoke to him in a kind and affectionate tone, the sort that people use when they bid farewell to kinsmen who are setting off on a long voyage, Govind thought. He was the head of the household since their father's death. Tall and sturdy with full blown cheeks and small eyes, he had a bristling moustache which gave his face a very fierce look. When he roared 'I'm Purushottam Ghanshyam Salukhe' in his hoarse voice all those who heard him trembled with fear. Govind had been scared of him since childhood, he couldn't remember having stood before him or addressed him as 'Anna' ever.

This was the first time he had brought something to his uncle's house. If his uncle asked him to bring some farming tools or implements he would do so, otherwise he would come empty handed. When he returned, however, he carried sacks of plantains and coconuts, mangoes, oranges, jackfruit from his uncle's orchards that were so vast that they extended right up to the fields.

His brother and uncle sat in the hall discussing arrangements that night.

"Are the legal papers ready in Karwar?"

"Yes. Must take Govind there in a couple of days to get his signature. Then they'll send the papers to the office in the village and his name will be inserted as my heir."

"Will you change his name?"

"No, no. Same name..Govind. Govind Bhaskar Gaonkar."

"And when will the religious ceremony be held?"

"Let's go to the priest's house tomorrow and fix a date. Get it over soon."

"So many relatives will come...and then there's the whole village. Will need at least four massive bundles of leaf platters for the meals."

"Yes. This ceremony is more important than his wedding ....when people come for his wedding some day they must realise that he is Bhaskar's son...!"

"Mama, a retired police official called Jogi Kadam has built a huge house by the Fort. He was enquiring about Govind... has a daughter of marriageable age..."

"Who told him about Govind?"

"Our cousin Susheela lives there..."

"Let's see, then. If the girl is good we can get them married by the month of Chaitra..."

"He'll give twenty tolas of gold jewellery and fifteen thousand cash..."

"We'll see about all that. Send him a message...let him wait for a month or two. Say we have to finish this work first."

They went to the Joish's house the next day to fix up an auspicious muhurth for the ceremony and to fetch a list of the items that would be needed.

"There's a very good muhurth on the Panchami in the month of Magh, it's the ninth of February" his mama said to his wife as they sat in the hall talking about the arrangements.

"Do whatever mama says. From now on he's your uncle as well as your father. You'll be happy," his brother said to Govind when he was ready to leave that evening.

Govind wanted to tell him everything but he was scared of his brother's temper. It was this brother, the eldest of four, who had brought respectability to their impoverished household in Asnoti. Having fought tooth and nail for every inch of land that they owned in Asnoti he was delighted that his younger brother would inherit his uncle's vast estate.

"Let's go to Karwar tomorrow" his uncle said to Govind one evening.

"Why, mama?"

"You know that I'm going to adopt you Govind. You must sign some papers first, then we'll have a religious ceremony.."

"But I don't want to be adopted, mama."

His uncle stared at him in amazement. This youngster had been staying in his house from childhood, he'd filled the empty place in his aunt's life with love and affection, and Bhaskar had always looked upon him as his own son. People had said they could have a child of their own even late in life so they had waited all this time..had they erred by not adopting him when he was a child?

"Why do you say that, my son?"

"When you adopt me I'll be like your son. Then I won't be able to marry Suman."

"Why must you marry Suman" She's your dear friend... look on her as your sister from now on ....we'll get you a beautiful bride decked in gold."

"No mama. I won't marry anyone else."

"What a mess this is...! Brought you here when you were this big, thought I'd adopt you..."

"Mama, adopt Suman instead. Then I'll stay here as your Gharjavai..."

His uncle was astounded by the boy's simplicity, by the way he spoke openly about all this without any embarrassment. That girl Suman has him completely under her thumb, he thought.

"But she's a girl, and if you become my son-in-law how can you take my name? Your children will bear the surname Salukhe, won't they?"

Then he seemed to fly into a temper.

"What will she do with her sister's children when she gets married and comes into this house? I tell you Govind, that girl brings misfortune..her mother died when she was born. Her father and sister are dead...God knows who she'll destroy next! And she's torn the earth's heart open with a plough...the earth won't forgive her..."

"But mama..."

"Not another word! Do you have the strength to marry her and to support her sister's children? I won't have any of that!"

"If I can't marry Suman I won't stay here."

His uncle began to feel that perhaps fate didn't want him to be blessed with a son and heir.

"Don't talk like that Govind" he pleaded, "I want a son who'll carry my name on, and there's another thing...no other clan will flourish in this neighbourhood. Our ancestor built up this settlement for the members of our family..."

"How will I flourish here, then?"

"I'll adopt you as my son with all the religious and social rituals, then you'll become a part of us."

"But Suman is a part of your clan, isn't she?"

"She's a girl. She'll go where she's given in marriage. A family's name lives on through the sons, not the daughters. Children take up their father's names."

"In that case I don't want to be adopted."

Bhaskar finally lost his temper.

"Go then, I won't beg you any more. Let's say what I spent on you for eighteen years has gone waste...let some third person carve up this estate...or I'll donate it to the temple!"

Govind tossed about in bed all that night. His mami came and stood by his bed silently. 'I should have accepted my childless state...why did I grow to love this youngster, so? Someone else's child cannot take the place of one that is born from one's own womb!' she wept. Finally she grabbed his shoulder,

"Why must you marry Suman, Govind? Why no other girl?" she asked.

"I don't know, mami."

"Don't call me mami.....!" she snapped. "And what do you plan to do with her sister's children?" Govind had no answer to that. I have sent for your

brothers, they "ll decide what to do with you" his uncle declared the next morning. "This land belonged to my ancestors, my father and I added to this estate. Four massive copper cauldrons ..... and more brass vessels than in any house in all of Shiddar. I wanted to give you all this ..... but who knows what spell that wretched girl has cast! She'll come to no good! I won't forgive her for this!"

Govind stuffed a few clothes into a bag and stepped out of the house.

"Arrey, where are you going? To Asnoti?" his aunt rushed after him but he made no reply.

He went straight to Suman's house.

"I'm going to Goa to look for a job. I have a cousin there..."

And what about me?"

"Stay here for a couple of months. Then we'll all go to Goa. What do you have here anyway?"

"You're right! What do I have left...but where are you going at this odd hour? The boat has gone, so has the launch...stay here. With me.. just for today."

"I'll be staying with you for the rest of my life, Suman."

The girl smiled as she led him into the house.

"You're a man, it's so easy for you to say that. You'll stamp your feet and water will gush out from the earth, you think. But I'm scared. Stay here. Just for today."

"I'll sit here...on the porch."

"No. Today, you're not my friend...you're my husband. Stay with me as my husband just for this day. Who knows ...I may become old by the time you return..?"

"You're mad!"

"Yes. I'm mad!" She snuggled close to him and playfully bit his cheek.

Vishranti, Gokul, Abole and many other women hovered in the court yard and peeped into the house as Govind sat there silently.

"He's kicked aside a gold mine... Look at him sitting

there, now" someone remarked.

Only Sumitra chose to come and sit before him.

"You'll take this boat across, won't you Govind?" she asked.

"Yes mami. I swear! Only death can stop me now."

"I didn't believe anything good would ever happen in my life, Kaki" Suman laughed as the woman sighed in relief and went away.

Suman rubbed some coconut oil on Govind's scalp and pinched and tickled him till he began to laugh. She began to grind the paste for the curry and when the fishmonger passed by the house on his cycle she rushed out with a measure of rice which she exchanged for some fish. She could hear loud voices in Bhaskar anna's house but she pretended that it was nothing to do with her as she went about her work.

"Govind, I'll give you an oil bath today" she declared.

"No! Why?"

"I won't listen to anything you say today."

She led him into the bath room and drew off his clothes and rubbed oil into his skin. Pouring hot water on his body she scrubbed him with soap and wiped him dry with a towel.

"If you'd given me a sari to wear, I'd have wiped you dry with it's edge..." She said.

"I will. You can do so for the rest of our lives, the.."

"And what about the children, when they come...will have to wipe them dry with my sari, too..."

"Whose children?"

Suman looked at him sharply for a second, his face was suddenly clouded with pain but he managed to smile as though it was a joke.

She sat by his side as he ate, feeding him morsels from time to time. When he belched in satisfaction and could eat no more she finished whatever he had left on his plate.

Some four or five men from the vaddo accompanied Bhaskar to Suman's house that afternoon.

"This wretched girl has cast a spell on him...throw her out! Have you ever heard of a young unmarried girl keeping a man in her house?" Bhaskar raved.

Suman went up to them calmly.

"I haven't locked him in, anna, he came on his own. I have nothing against the adoption. What can I do if he doesn't want it himself?"

"But it's wrong of you to keep him in your house without asking anyone" Rama spluttered.

"Wrong, Ram dada? We've grown up together, want to get married too. But now there are obstacles to our marriage. Would you have cleared them if we had told you? My uncle cheated me of four khandis worth of land...not one of you said a word . Would you have gone against Bhaskar anna and incurred his anger by getting us married? I'm an orphan today, only I decide what I must do."

"So you throw all decency and morality to the winds? Are the men in this vaddo dead that you have to make your own decisions? We won't tolerate this in the vaddo. Bring him out...Govind! Go home with your uncle!"

Govind appeared on the porch.

"I've told you I won't be adopted. I was going to Goa but I missed the boat and the launch,. I'll go tomorrow. I won't stay here, nor will I go home" he said.

"What can anyone do if he refuses to be adopted" Narshinv finally said and everyone agreed that it was true.

"But we won't let you live together outside marriage! Not in this vaddo! We'll break your bones..!"

"He'll go away tomorrow, dada" Suman said in a low voice as the men turned away.

This day is mine, I won't be scared of anyone. Suman decided as she shut the door and they sat huddled in each other's arms. Who knew where Bai's children had wandered off to!

"Suman, I'll get a job in Goa, and then I'll take all of you. My pay won't be enough.. we'll be very poor..."

"Doesn't matter, Long as I can be with you... but Govind..."

"What?"

"When a man leaves an unmarried girl behind he forgets her, they say...you won't, will you?" she clasped him tightly in her arms.

Suman got up and washed and powdered her face and applied kaajal in her eyes. She combed her hair and tucked flowers into it. She generally looked unkempt in her dirty skirt and blouse, but today, dressed in a new sari she seemed as fresh and pretty as a red hibiscus blossom,

"Why have you dressed up like this?"

"For you. Only for you..."

Suman sat close to him whispering words of love into his ears. He couldn't make out what she said but he revelled in the fragrance of the flowers in her hair, the scent of her body... They were locked in embrace like two serpents twined about each other, their hot breath mingled together and their hearts thumped as their young bodies strove to become one.

Suman moved away and came out on the porch. Just a while ago the men of the vaddo had created such a commotion here... It was as though someone had destroyed the placid atmosphere of the vaddo, the houses on all sides were like flaming bushes and lightning dripped from the sky. Only a solitary plant laden with flowers and leaves stood erect amidst this destruction, but how long could this frail creeper defy the elements?

"Govind..must you go tomorrow? Stay another day..."

"No. My uncle and my brothers..."

Suman placed her hand on his mouth cutting off the words.

"Don't say another word.. talk only of love! Govind, I'm scared, I feel this is our first night together, it's also our last! This night is ours..."

"No, you silly girl. Only death can keep us apart."

"Whose death? I pray to God to take me before you...

like he took Aai and my sister."

"Not married yet, and this is what you pray for?"

"What does it matter whether we get married or not? I'll pray I die before you..."

"You said we'd talk about love, and here you talk of death!"

Suman fed the children and put them to sleep in the kitchen. They had dinner and sat a while as though waiting for the Night Queen creeper to burst into bloom. Suman had laid out his bed in the hall and placed the shining brass tumbler of water by his pillow. She drew him to bed and blew out the lamp. Then, like the cloud in the sky, like the lightning that flashed, she shrugged off her clothes and clasped him in her arms.

"Why tonight, Suman?"

"Because tomorrow I'll grow old. This night will never come back. And then you'll go away tomorrow..so don't say no! I've accepted you as my husband in my heart and mind. This body'll turn to gold if I give it to you ...what use is it, otherwise..?"

Slowly, by degrees Govind became aroused. Suman was astounded by the strength and virility of this young man who looked so boyish and weak. He played upon her body raising her to heights of ecstacy till she melted, like camphor, in his embrace and lay like a silken figure in his bed.

They lay in each other's arms for a long while, utterly satiated, whispering into one another's ears. It was the past that they spoke of, the future was too frightening to even talk about. As Govind grew drowsy Suman rubbed her body against his, Govind! What did we decide! This night is not for sleeping!"

They remained awake all through the night, yet, in the morning Suman was as fresh as a mogra flower. Her heart was light and she seemed to walk on air as she whirled about merrily with a song on her lips. There was a lot to be done for Govind would be taking the morning launch to Goa.

"Why are you going to Goa now? Go to your uncle's house and get adopted by him. Then marry the girl he chooses for you."

"Why?"

"You wanted me...I'm completely your's now. What more do you want?"

"And you? Will you remain here as a 'kept' woman, as my concubine?"

"I'll smash your face! Think you're too clever, do you?"

"Hurry up, now, I'm getting late. Where's my bag?"

Govind, you'll really come back...won't you?"

"Of course! I'll cross this river and come back...again and again, Won't fear anyone any more."

He was standing at the door when his uncle and his three elder brothers strode into the court yard, their fists were curled tight and their heavy foot steps seemed to shake the earth.

"Govind! Do you refuse to be adopted by mama?" the eldest one roared.

"Yes." Govind stood before them stiff and erect.

"Why?"

"Because I want to marry Suman."

The way he uttered those words made Suman feel that their wedding was solemnised at that very moment. The eldest brother flew into a towering rage and slapped Govind soundly. The middle one punched him on the back and threw him to the ground. Suman rushed forward to help but they pushed her aside letting forth a stream of curses. She stood there silently listening to the curses, it was as though some vile, foul smelling liquid had been thrown all over her.

"Won't let this wretch cross the river and come here ever again" they screeched as two of them grabbed him by the arms and dragged him towards the river. Govind walked silently between them making no sign of protest.

The Kali river seemed to have liquid kaajal flowing between its banks, why didn't the water gleam in the

morning sun? The three islands lay ugly and fearful to behold as though they were encircled by serpents, the massive Ghangre rock loomed out of the hillock at Kerwadi as though it would slide down in a moment and destroy everything around.

She walked towards the house with leaden steps, the children were cowering silently in the hall. Her hands flew to her belly, were these children born of her womb, why did her body ache so? She began to smile... Danced all over me, the scamp, looks so innocent but he's shown me what he's worth!

As time passed, however, she became angry with herself. Fire rained down on all sides, how did she dare snatch those few moments of bliss...God! How they beat Govind! She would burst into tears if she went into the house... she sat there staring at the gleaming sunlight.

Everything was calm and quiet... the people of the vaddo have locked their doors and windows and set off for the hills, she thought. Salu ajji said that this whole area was a thick forest before our ancestors set up this settlement. That forest will creep up once again, wild herbs and thorny shrubs will cover the earth. Appa will roam about stark mad, Bai's bier will be raised yet again...and then a golden deer will come to this spot...!

When Suman broke out of her reverie she saw that there were men and women in each of the houses, but their doors were shut to her. Locks hung from the doors, shutting her out as never before. Ganpat ajja always said "The Kali yug has started!" but when did it start in this vaddo, she wondered.

It's not their fault, some sorrows have to be borne alone, like the sorrow a widow feels, she thought. There in the distance a venomous serpent danced on the surface of the water, had Govind crossed the river yet?

As they trudged the two miles to the pier in the village adjoining Shiddar they asked him again and again,

"Will you let mama adopt you?"

"No" he replied each time. "Why did you abuse Suman when it wasn't her fault?"

The middle brother was so enraged that he almost hit the youth but the eldest one held him back.

"Let's get home first. Then we'll see how he says 'No'!"

The river was almost overflowing when they got to the pier at Agadi. As it is, the Kali river became turbulent at this point, but now the high tide added to its ferocity! Here, at the foot of the Shiddaraam hillock a boat carrying a newly wed couple had capsized and everyone had drowned. People said that you could still hear music at night when the bridal couple emerged from the waters to frolic on the bank.

Suman and I should leap into the river from this hillock, then we'll become immortal, our love games will continue through the ages, Govind thought. But in an instant he remembered that Suman had those children to live for, she was not all alone as he was! I shall have to die alone, he decided, as a deep abiding sorrow settled in his breast.

"Tarya mam, push the boat into the water."

"The tide is high and the current strong. Will we be able to row in it?"

"Here, give me one oar!"

The eldest brother began to row the boat which was tossed up and down as the boatman strove to keep it on course in the strong current. Between Kerwadi, Karkal, Khargey and Hulgey in the north and Karwar, Kodibag and Sadashivgad in the south was a massive body of water, and surrounding this whole expanse were green hills and islands, villages and fields. Such was the spectacle that nature had spread before man.

The boat reached the middle of the river and seemed to pause for a moment, caught between the current of the

surface and the strong undertow. In the wink of an eye Govind threw himself into the water, sinking deep down into its murky depths. Only once, like a bubble, did his head bob up on the surface, but in an instant it was gone.

The brothers wailed helplessly. Their village Asnoti was at a distance from the river, none of them had learnt to swim. The boatman struggled to keep the boat afloat and get it to the shore. Such a vast ocean of water and such a tiny body was being tossed about in its depths!

The brothers beat their breasts and wept as the boatman called out aloud,

"Boy has drowned .... boy drowned .... Haaaiii....!"

His shrill cry carried across the water and echoed from bank to bank. The anglers sitting with their rods and the fisher folk casting their nets in the water froze in their tracks as did the men who were watering the low lying fields on the banks. Three or four boats and canoes took to the water as the tide began to change.

The Kali river that flows from the sandalwood forests of its origin to the mighty Arabian Sea seems to care nothing for the weight of sorrow piled upon its banks, for the very heavens that have collapsed into its depths! The murky waters bubble past every boulder and crevasse carrying their sorrowful tidings. How dark are the waters of this river Kali, this Ganga that flows through Karwar!

At this point of time when the high tide gives place to the low the water of the river swirls about like one gigantic whirlpool. The strong current on the surface struggles against the vicious undertow as shafts of afternoon sunlight strike, like spears, into its depths and a willful breeze ruffles its surface.

Gurgling water, shimmering sunlight, a playful breeze.... and a lifeless body in their midst! Cruel nature seems to have extracted every bit of warmth from Govind's body and let it loose on its journey to the Great Unknown. Who

knows who decides the path it will take as it moves on, buffeted by every wave.

People were searching the banks on both sides of the river and the air was thick with their cries. Boatmen were searching the edges of the islands, the fishermen had put away their nets as the news spread like fire in the wild grass and people rushed to the river bank.

The body completed its journey as the sunlight turned mellow and golden that evening and came to rest on the bank just below the vaddo of the jevankaars in Shiddar.

Suman could sense that some great tragedy had occurred, she could see people rushing about... but she didn't have the nerve to ask anyone anything. What if they said to her, 'Why, the heavens have collapsed!'

She sat there, barely conscious , the sweat pouring out of her frame. These people are running away from me, they don't want to say anything to me but finally, this whole tragedy will come to settle here, on my heart!

Sumitra kaki came up to her at twilight, why was she so crumpled, why did she seem so pale? Had she been weeping, even her words seemed to be heavy with blood!

" My dear, your Govind has killed himself...he jumped into the Kali river!"

"Killed himself?"

The words seemed to pierce her heart and her veins and sinews seemed to snap, like string. But she didn't shed a single tear, she couldn't betray him by weeping and lightening the load of sorrow on her heart. All her life lay ahead for her to mourn!

She drew off the bangles that encircled her young wrists and threw them into the pit beneath the plantain tree. She wiped the spot of kumkum on her forehead and shedding the skirt and blouse she normally wore, draped herself in a sari. Drawing the end of the sari across her face

she sank down in the darkness of the hall. Govind! I wanted to die before you, a married woman with all the emblems of my marital status intact! But look at my fate! I'm a widow even before I am wed!

Glossary

Aai	Mother.
Aashaad	Month of heavy rainfall.
Abole	A pale orange flower.
Ajji	Grandmother.
Ajjo	Grandfather.
Anna	Elder brother.
Appa	Father.
Arudra	A month of heavy rain.
Bab	A term of respect, generally added to a man's name.
Bai	Term of endearment for a girl.
Bangda	A type of fish.
Barmo	Probably a corruption of Brahma, one of the deities in the Hindu pantheon. Used here to denote one of the lesser spirits worshipped in the villages.
Bayul	Term of endearment for a girl child.
Betaal	A village deity, one of the lesser Spirits.
Bhakri	Thin flat flour cake baked on a griddle.
Bhandi Jatra	A jatra is a temple festival where a Bhandi or decorated chariot bearing the deities is ceremonially drawn by devotees.
Bhau	Elder brother.

Bhavoji	Brother-in-law. Sister's husband.
Bund	Embankment surrounding the field.
Chaitra	The first month in the Indian calendar followed by Konkani people.
Chavoth	The fourth day of the bright half of the lunar month. Used generally to denote Ganesh Chaturthi, the festival marking the birth of Lord Ganesh in Bhadrapad (August-September).
Dada	Elder brother.
Dhalo	A religious festival marked by song and dance, performed by women.
Dhanmantary	A corruption of the word Dhanvantary, the mythical physician of the Gods.
Divajkannis	Literally, women who hold the flaming divaj or oil lamps aloft before the deities. These women observe strict rituals and fasts during the temple festivals and move in a procession before the palki bearing the deities.
Dottore	Portuguese for Doctor.
Dr Antonio de Diveira	Destruction to Dr. Antonio
Freedom Fighter	One who fought for the Liberation of Goa from Portuguese rule, a task finally achieved on December 19,1961.
Ghadi	A priest who can communicate with spirits, who has mystic healing powers.
Gharjavai	A son-in-law who lives with his wife's parents.

Ghati	Literally, one who lives on high land, on the ghats. Used contemptuously by those living on the coastal plains to describe people from the Ghat regions.
Haldi Muhurth	An auspicious ritual that forms part of the wedding ceremony where the bride is anointed with turmeric and oil.
Hiranyakashyap	The powerful king, father of Prahlad, who was killed by Lord Vishnu in his incarnation as Narasimha, the creature that was half lion and half man.
Humman	A spicy coconut based curry.
Jevankaars	Literally, those who partake of ritual meals. On festive occasions as well as at ceremonies when libations are offered to one's departed ancestors it is customary to serve a ritual meal to one's guests. The guests invited for this purpose, however, should belong to a family or clan quite separate from one's own.
Joishi	A corruption of the word Jyotishi, perhaps, denotes a priest or spiritual advisor.
Juvo	Island.
Kaki	Aunt. Father's brother's wife.
Kalash	Sacred pot set up for worship.
Kali Yug	The final 'Yug' or Age. Hindus believe this age is one where evil will thrive, and the gods will be provoked into destroying all creation.
Kalvant	Temple dancer.

Karthick Punav	The full moon night in the month of Karthick in late autumn.
Karthick	A month in late autumn.
Kasale aluva shaak	A spicy yam curry.
Kashti	Loin cloth.
Katya	Colloquial form of the word Krittika, the name of a star.
Khandi	A measure for solids. 20 Khandis equal 1 Kumbh.
Kheer	A sweet porridge.
Konkan doodhi	A vegetable belonging to the gourd family.
Kudav	A measure for solids. 20 Kudavs equal 1 khandi.
Kumbh	A measure for solids, generally used for measuring grain.
Kunbi	A sub-caste of agricultural workers.
Maand	A flat expanse of land where religious ceremonies are performed in the village.
Magh Punav	The full moon night in the month of Magh, in early spring.
Magh	A month in the Indian calendar, corresponding roughly to late January-February.
Mama	Maternal uncle. Mother's brother.
Matov	A canopy of palm fronds slung over a framework of wood to provide shade.
Matric	The Matriculation examination which a student takes on the completion of ten years in school.
Mavshi	Aunt. Mother's sister.
Meerg	A corruption of Mrig-the star Mrigshirsha-in early June bringing the first few showers of rain.

Mudo	A spherical container woven out of grass and hay, used for storing grain.
Mulpurush	Founder. Here the ancestor who set up the settlement.
New laws	The Agricultural Tenancy Act 1964 which bestowed ownership of the land to those who tilled the soil, thus depriving absentee landlords and those land owners who let out their land to be tilled.
Nirpanas	A vegetable.
Palki	The palanquin borne aloft by devotees in which deities are carried out of the temple on festive days.
Payas	A sweet preparation of rice, sugar and milk.
Poli	Thin pancake also known as a dosa.
Rambhas	Celestial nymphs, dancers in Indra's court. Popular tradition states that during the Dhalo celebrations these divine spirits enter the bodies of some women and young girls giving them oracular powers.
Sakarambo	A type of mango that is very sweet.
Salazar Murdabad	de oliveira Salazar-the Portuguese governor of Goa who strove to keep it as a colony of Portugal. He sealed the borders of Goa to isolate it from the rest of India.
Sankrant	A goddess.
Shaak	A spicy vegetable curry.
Shaak, Khathkhathey	Both are spicy curries.
Shastras	Religious texts.
Shet	A rich merchant.

Shigmo	Festival marking the end of winter and the advent of spring, similar to Holi. Troupes of dancers and musicians move in a procession through the village performing traditional dances.
Shitod	A mixture of cowdung and water that is ritually sprinkled in the house and the courtyard.
Soon	A colloquial name for one of the months in the Indian calendar probably corresponding to the month of Poush, roughly December-January.
Sravaan	Month of heavy rainfall.
Suvashin	Literally, a married woman whose husband is alive. The practice of inviting married women and young girls for a ritual meal on festive days is considered to be an auspicious act.
Tai	Elder sister.
Tarya maam	Boatman addressed as uncle by the villagers.
Tavosoli	A thick pancake made of flour and grated cucumber.
Thalipeet	A delicacy, like a pancake, baked on a griddle.
Tola	A term used to denote the weight of gold.
Torana	An arrangement of leaves and flowers strung across the main doorway of a house on festive occasions.
Trayodashi	The thirteenth day in the lunar cycle.

Triphal	A pungent spice, like pepper, which is used as a seasoning in curries.
Udad polis	Dosas or flat pancakes made of ground rice and udad dal or black gram.
Vaddo	Neighbourhood. Cluster of houses forming part of a village.
Vaijini	Midwife.
Vaini	Sister-in-law. Brother's wife.
Vaishakh	One of the summer months.
Veedo	A pair of betel leaves folded about a betel nut, offered as a mark of respect.
Vhanni	Sister-in-law.
Vhonni	Sister-in-law.
Vimana	Aeroplane. The reference is to that episode in the Ramayana where Sita, Ram and Lakshman return to Ayodhya on the Pushpak Viman after defeating Ravan and destroying Lanka.

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Kali Ganga, tells the story of the young girl Suman, growing up in a small village on the banks of the river Kali Ganga. With a rare descriptive clarity, the novel recreates a piece of life with its endless cycle of births and deaths, the river with its varying moods, the village and its people and the many festivals and fairs, all seamlessly woven to create a well crafted piece of fiction. One of the finest novels to have emerged from Konkani literature.

Mahabaleshwar Sail (b.1943), joined the Indian Army when he was 17, during which he took part in the Goa liberation operation and also the Indo-Pak war of 1965. Begining his literary career writing in Marathi, he later, devoted himself to writing in Konkani. He has published two short story collections and three novels including *Kali Ganga*, *Aranyakand* and *Kalbhonvro*. Awards include Goa Konkani Bhasha Mandal Award, Goa Kala Akademi Award and Central Sahitya Akademi Award.

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